

**'Pray What Moral Sentiments did your Wild Couple Possess, when
First They Met?': The Relationship Between Language, Sociability and
Morality in the Works of David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid**

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Declaration

Portions of Chapter IV have previously appeared in my M.Sc. dissertation entitled, "Adam Smith and the Centrality of Language in his Characterisation of Moral Sentiments", submitted in 1996.

This thesis has been composed by myself and the work on which it is based is my own.

Contents

Abstract.....	6
Introduction.....	7

Chapter I

Epistemology, Sociability and Language: Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century Theoretical Influences on The Scottish Enlightenment.....	19
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1. Linguistic Cross-roads: Rationalism, Empiricism and the Ascendancy of Secular Language Theory.....	21
2. Secular Ethics and the Influence of ‘Polite Society’: The Importance of Language as a Practical Tool of Socialisation.....	36
3. Conversation and Community: The Role of Language in the Emerging Sociability Debate.....	51
4. The Merging of the Epistemological and the Social Elements of Language within the Scots’ Efforts to Construct a ‘Science of Man’.....	59

Chapter II

David Hume and the Importance of Linguistic Moral Convention.....	62
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1. Hume’s Effort to Establish a ‘Science of Man’.....	66
2. Hume’s Attempt to Strike a New Course in the Rationalist vs. Sentimentalist Debate.....	70
3. The Virtue of Justice, Human Convention, and the Role of Language in Understanding the Principles of Morality.....	80
4. Hume on the Formation of Moral Standards.....	104

5. The Individual's Development of Moral Consciousness.....	110
6. Potential Pitfalls of Linguistic Convention in Relation to Morals: <i>Appendix IV: Of Some Verbal Disputes</i>	116
7. <i>A Dialogue: The Linguistic Convention and Moral Convention in Action</i> ...	121
8. <i>Of the Standard of Taste: The Relationship between the Development of Taste, Morality, and Linguistic Convention</i>	130

Chapter III

Adam Smith and the Centrality of Language in His Characterisation of Moral Sentiments	137
1. Contemporary Developments in the Theory of Language: Condillac, Rousseau and the Origin of Language.....	139
2. The Contrast Between Smith's <i>Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Language</i> and His <i>The Theory of Moral Sentiments</i> : The Origin of Language and the and the Origin of Moral Sentiments.....	151
A. The Origins of Communication.....	154
B. The Movement From Natural Communication to Artificial Construct.....	157
3. The Gaining of Proficiency in the Communication of Morals.....	166
4. The Personal Nature of Moral Sentiments: The Influence of Conversation and Association on the formation of Moral Sentiments.....	169
5. Assumptions of Honesty and Veracity in Sympathetic and Linguistic Exchange.....	173
6. The Conflict Between Communication of Sympathy and Moral Judgement.....	175
7. The Effect of Smith's Linguistic Suppositions on His Characterisation of Justice.....	182
8. Conclusions and Conflicts.....	197

Chapter IV

Rhetoric and Adam Smith's Conception of the Communication and Refinement of Our Moral Sense.....	203
1. Adam Smith and Rhetoric: A Lifelong Curiosity.....	204
2. British Empiricism, Rhetoric and Adam Smith.....	208
3. Rhetoric as a Tool of Persuasion: Moral Sentiments, Polite Society and Adam Smith.....	215
4. Rhetorical Antecedents to Smith's Theory of Moral Refinement: Influence and Adaptation.....	220

Chapter V

Thomas Reid: Linguistic Discourse and Theoretical Discontent.....	236
1. First Principles, Common Sense and the Construction of Reid's Linguistic Paradigm.....	239
2. The Centrality of Natural Language in Reid's Linguistic Theory.....	247
3. The Formation of Artificial Language and the Marginalisation of Sympathy.....	251
4. The Moral and Ethical Ramifications of Reid's Rational Linguistic Construction.....	256
5. The Ambiguity of Language and Reid's Attack on the Philosophical Presumptions of Hume and Smith.....	265
6. Honesty of Usage: Linguistic Veracity and Philosophical Subterfuge.....	274
Conclusion.....	293
Appendix.....	298
Bibliography.....	311

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide an account of the influence and impact of David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid's depiction of language on their characterisation of the origin, communication, and development of moral sentiments. These thinkers were well aware that none of the arts, sciences, or institutions of man could have developed without language. Furthermore, language was recognised by them as essential for the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another. As a result, it will be argued that discussions of language and language use by Hume, Smith and Reid played an important role illustrating, substantiating and corroborating their theories generally, and more specifically, lend insight into their conclusions regarding the development of human sociability and morality. Utilising published works, as well as unpublished personal and student notes, this thesis traces both the role of language in the construction of the individual theories of Hume, Smith and Reid as well as the theoretical tensions which arose between these philosophers relating to their characterisation of language and language use in relation to man's formation of a conception of morality.

Theorising on the origin and implication of language held an important place in the European Enlightenment generally, with some of the greatest thinkers of the period contributing to the debate. As a result, this thesis will first engage in a brief overview of the major discussions of the nature and origin of language and its relation to morals in the time leading up to the period in question, as well as the contemporary debate. This section aims to provide a conceptual framework from which to explore Hume, Smith and Reid's concurrence or divergence from the contemporary debate regarding the relationship between man's use of language as the central tool of interpersonal communication, and how this fact relates to man's conception of virtue and vice.

The thesis next turns its attention to the work of David Hume. Aiming to construct a comprehensive analysis of Hume's scattered linguistic references, it will be argued that the relevance of examining Hume's characterisation of language relates directly to his claim that it is custom and convention, rather than autonomous reason or innate sentiment, which are principle means of shaping man's social and moral character. As a result, references to language and language use by Hume served as a significant tool in illustrating and substantiating his more general theoretical claims regarding man's social and moral character.

Building upon the analysis of Hume, the thesis next turns its attention to an exploration of the influence of such linguistic assumptions on the moral theory of Adam Smith. While agreeing with many of Hume's interpretations as to the character of language, it is clear that Smith did not share Hume's faith in the ability of linguistic convention to serve as a reliable medium of moral guidance. Maintaining that Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and writings on rhetoric are at the centre of his thinking on language and language use, we will investigate how his characterisation of language is reflected in, and exercised influence upon, his conception of man's morality and sociability. Perhaps the best example of the multifarious implications of language and language use in the presentation of man's sociable and moral character amongst the theorists being discussed, Smith's references to language and language play a significant supportive role in the substantiation and dissemination of his theory.

To highlight the influence of linguistic analysis on the period's characterisation of morals, the final stage of the thesis explores the efforts of Thomas Reid to present a countervailing theory of morals from that of both Hume and Smith. Drawing upon Reid's published works, private notes, and student lecture notes; the closing section examines Reid's utilisation of a very different interpretation of the nature and role of language in his effort to challenge the forces of scepticism and moral relativism.

Introduction

The assertion that the works of David Hume, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid utilised references to language in order to illustrate, corroborate and substantiate their conclusions regarding the formation and maintenance of a system of morals seems reasonable given the fact that at both a social and philosophical level there existed in 18th Century Scotland a heightened awareness of language and language use. On the social plane, the cultivation of moderation, manners, gentility and politeness arising out of the urban culture of London during the early part of the eighteenth century was to have a profound impact on Scotland. On the philosophical front, the coming of the Enlightenment resulted in a re-evaluation of the role of language played in the formation of man's nature and on its continuing influence in the formation of man's social and moral character. This heightened appreciation of language at both a social and intellectual level would to have a profound effect on the characterisation of language's relation to man's sociability and morality by the great Scottish philosophers under discussion. While presenting distinct lines of reasoning as to how man comes to formulate and understand his moral universe, these multifarious influences relating to language and language use would come to play an important role in these philosopher's efforts to make their conclusions about morals both accessible and persuasive.

This enthusiastic exploration of language and language use manifested itself within the general Scottish society during the mid-18th Century, as the nation became pre-occupied with participating actively in what was to become known as 'polite' society. This desire to become an active participant in the promotion of 'polite' society is significant because it necessarily entailed a heightened interest in the mastery of effective interpersonal communication through 'polite' conversation. The ideals of politeness first appeared in the British Isles during the Restoration in the form of the 'Polite Whigs', who considered its promotion necessary in order to adequately defend their urban life and politics. Challenging the Spartan virtues patterned on the classical ideals of armed proprietors and landed classes, these

advocates of 'polite society' hoped that the anachronistic idea of a *polis* made up of armed citizens would give way to leisured taxpayers under a parliamentary government. As a result, they hoped that the Spartan virtues patterned on the classical ideals of armed proprietors would be replaced by the 'polite' virtues of sociability and conversation.

This emerging notion of politeness soon came to be seen as an active civilising agent. Through observation, conversation, and cultivation, the advocates of this movement were convinced that the polite virtues would allow men to become aware of their own needs as well as the needs of others. Through the medium of polite conversation, it was held that man could shape himself and others into positive agents of social advancement and harmony. As a result, politeness became a serious practical means of propagating morality. Seen by its proponents as offering the best possible method for man to engage in social interaction with his fellow man, this new 'polite society' was cultivated throughout much of the eighteenth century and deployed against Puritan, Tory, and Republican alike.

This cultural pre-occupation with 'polite society' was soon to reverberate across the length and breadth of Britain, and was to have a particularly profound influence on the Scots. Lacking a Tory landed interest and the heavily armoured Calvinism of the late English Cromwellian period, the Whiggish emphasis on polite conversation could more easily gain a hold in Scotland. As a result, we witness emerging in Scotland during the first half of the eighteenth century a society dedicated to the furtherance of sociability, conversation, and moral improvement.

The heightened interest in the cultivation of polite conversation also manifested itself in a proliferation of clubs and debating societies in Edinburgh and Glasgow; fraternal organisations which were not confined merely to the intellectuals and students of the Scottish Universities, but became as well a focal point of the general public attendance. For example, out of the famous Select Society there emerged in 1761 a club dedicated to 'Promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English

Language in Scotland'.¹ The functions of these clubs was in large part to provide a forum in which to cultivate the skills necessary in mastering polite conversation, particularly in clubs like Allan Ramsay's Easy Club and the Select Society. Yet another example is the Belle Lettres Society, this Edinburgh club stressed the ethical function of friendship in social life. This growing interest in the mastering of correct language use led to a burgeoning number of both formal and informal gatherings dedicated to the perfection of those means of proper social interaction that would result in 'polite' conversation and the correct use of the English language.²

In addition to these formal gathering points, English periodicals dedicated to the advancement of sociability and polite conversation began to gain in popularity well beyond the confines of clubs and debating societies. As will be addressed in Chapter I, the reading, oft times aloud, of the English periodical *The Spectator* became a rage within the coffee houses of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. As the century wore on, Scottish periodicals themselves began to pick up and develop themes relating to polite society and conversation. The editor of the *Caledonian Mercury* underlined the importance of sociable exchange by inserting such selections as 'An Essay on Conversation', which described converse as a 'peculiar blessing and advantage of mankind' and included models of polite conversation taken from works of the abbe de Sellegarde (29 July and September 1765). This emphasis on polite conversation, so characteristic of Scottish culture, proceeded unabated to the end of the century and beyond. In the late eighteenth century, for example, *The Bee* defined the 'distinctive character of the human species' as it's 'faculty of accumulating knowledge in the aggregate' and suggested that 'extensive conversation' was the foundation of civilisation.

¹ See Christopher Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p. 17.

² John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher, eds., *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1993) pp. 8 – 9.

All the above cited examples point to the heightened awareness of the significance of language and language use within 18th Century Scotland. From the intellectuals and Universities, to the coffeehouses and local periodicals, we witness in Scotland during this period that interpersonal communication and conversation were actively engaged in throughout Scottish society in order to promote personal refinement. In order to improve their manners, the Scots held great credence in the idea that it is necessary to converse with our fellow man in order to gain a rich and varied perspective, and thus increase our natural taste. This effort thus not only stressed the social pleasure but also the *ethical* value of conversation of everyday life. As a result, the Scottish moralists sought to construct an understanding and conception of ethics that bridged morality and politeness by finding the source of both in fundamental social passions. The moral sentiments were seen as leading to goodness as well as civility, and these two characteristics achieved a state of perfect harmony in the 'man of feeling'; though moral sentiments were thought to be natural to all, Scottish moralists were impressed by the degree to which they could be cultivated through active and conscientious social engagement.

This heightened interest in language and language use can also partially be attributed to the view of many 18th Century Scotsmen that their own version of English, to put it in David Hume's words, was 'very corrupt'. This made them very anxious to write in pervasive, elegant, and 'correct' English. Conscious of being in some senses at the periphery of English culture and literature, the Scots studied English rhetoric, style and verbiage in a way the English did not. As Alexander Carlyle, one of the founders of the Moderate movement, remarked in his autobiography, "[T]o every man bred in Scotland the English language was in some respects a foreign tongue, the precise value and force of whose words and phrases

he did not understand and therefore was continually endeavouring to word his expressions by additional epithets or circumlocutions which made his writings appear stiff and redundant".³

The fear of 'Scottism' haunted none more than David Hume, leading Lord Monboddo to quip that Hume died not confessing his sins, but rather his Scottisms.⁴ James Beattie, recognised as one of Hume's greatest detractors, none the less shared his concern for the need to refine language use. In his pamphlet *Scottisms arranged in Alphabetical Order, designed to correct Improprieties of Speech and Writing* (1787), Beattie sets out to instruct young writers to avoid any and all Scottism which might creep into their writings and importantly their speech as well.

The heightened awareness of language and language use in Scotland was to have a profound effect on every level of Scottish society. Edinburgh had a chair of English a century and a half before Oxford and Cambridge. Lecturing in Latin was gradually abandoned within the Scottish Universities, an effort advanced most notably by Francis Hutchison, whose influence on Smith, as well as his general writings, has led many to see him as the father of the Scottish Enlightenment. In addition, among the writers of 18th Century Scotland rhetoric as a civic virtue rose to its height during this period.⁵

Within this society increasingly focused on language and language use, the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment also found its roots. Concomitant with the developing interest in polite society and the eradication of 'Scottism', the intellectual advancements of the Age of Enlightenment would come to play an important role in these Scots' understanding of the nature of language and its relation to man's moral disposition. Speculation as to the significance of language

³ See Berry pp. 16 – 17.

⁴ See Berry p. 16.

⁵ David Daiches, "Style Periodique and Style Coupe: Hugh Blair and the Scottish Rhetoric of American Independence", in Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey Smitten (eds.), Scotland and America in the Age of

was one of the emerging areas of inquiry that attracted the attention of Enlightenment thinkers in Scotland.⁶ While Hume, Smith and Reid cannot be considered full-time students of language, the fact that all of them discussed the topic indicates their growing awareness of the important role language and the nature of interpersonal communication played in the study of human nature.⁷

This increased interest in language was, in itself, not unique to Scotland. Indeed, throughout early modern Europe there was a heightened interest in both the origin and development of language. What remains to be seen, and is the central focus of this thesis, is how the influence of language and language use came to colour the theories of Hume, Smith and Reid. In what way did the growing epistemological interest in language come to be infused into their theories? To what degree did these epistemological assumptions regarding language come to influence their characterisation of the attributes of polite society and conversation, and in turn, how did both these areas of interest in language and language use come to be incorporated into their efforts to substantiate their claims as to the fundamentals of man's sociability and his coming to an understanding of morality?

What made the works of Hume, Smith and Reid unique, and the central contention of this thesis, was the way in which these Scottish Enlightenment philosophers integrated accounts of language within their theories of morality and sociability in order to illustrate, substantiate and validate their conclusions. Driven on by an intellectual and popular culture pre-occupied with the discourse of polite society as well as by a philosophical climate deeply concerned with epistemological implications of language, these Scots initiated an amalgamation of these two spheres of linguistic enquiry which would come to colour their conceptions of virtue, sociability, and moral philosophy.

Enlightenment (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) p. 210.

⁶ See, Isabel F. Knight, The Geometric Spirit: The Abbé de Condillac and the French Enlightenment. (London: Yale University Press, 1968) p. 145.

⁷ Pierre Juliard, Philosophies of Language In Eighteenth-Century France (Paris: Mouton, 1970) p. 15.

Hume, Reid and Smith were selected for discussion in this thesis because they represent a group of scholars who seem to be keenly aware of the usefulness of drawing upon references to language to illustrate and substantiate their theories of sociability and morality. It will be maintained that these major figures of the Enlightenment in Scotland were very much concerned with the language and language use. This fact is revealed both in works explicitly dealing with language, such as Smith's *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Language*, as well as in those where we find linguistic discussions imbedded within larger theoretical contexts, such as Hume, Smith and Reid's attempt to find the source of man's social and moral nature. While other Scottish theorists, most notably Lord Monboddo, wrote on the topic of language, these discussions were not incorporated into a larger discussion of the influence of language on man's sociable and moral character. Therefore, these other works have been excluded from discussion in this thesis.

Hume, Smith and Reid also represented a means by which to keep the discussion of this topic relatively encapsulated. Hume is recognised as being a leading pioneer in the creation of a 'science of man' that utilised empirically grounded means by which to discover the driving forces behind both man's sociability and how man came to an understanding of morality. In turn, Smith is well recognised as having drawn upon Hume's works in creating his own theories of morality and sociability, though coming to different conclusions. Lastly, Reid offered pointed criticism of both of Smith's and Hume's conclusions regarding the nature of man's sociability and morality, proffering an alternative theory that contrasted greatly with the previous two theories being examined here. In all three cases, however, we witness consistent references to language and language use in relation to their articulation of their theories of sociability and morality. By examining the role of language within the context of these three Scottish philosophers, we are able to effectively examine the role of language within the interrelated theories proffered by them regarding the character and nature of man's sociability and morality.

It is the contention of this thesis that, while building upon some of the major contemporary themes of the period relating to the character and role of language, it was the pragmatic references to language and language use to illustrate, substantiate, and validate their moral theories that distinguishes the work of Hume, Reid and Smith as a distinct branch of enquiry within the larger linguistic discourse witnessed throughout Europe during the Eighteenth Century. Indeed, it will be argued that in their efforts to create a comprehensive 'science of man' it was the very unwillingness, or perhaps inability, of Hume, Smith and Reid to relate language and language use to their epistemological assumptions and conclusions about human morality that makes their efforts on this front worthy of investigation. The result is an analysis of theoretical methodologies presented by these three theorists that suggests a moral universe in which ethical feelings and moral judgments were cultivated through communication and a proper understanding of the attributes and limitations of language.

While these theorists differed dramatically in their ultimate conclusions, all three do seem to come to agree on one fundamental point in relation to the topic at hand: that the true essence of man's moral character is most readily demonstrated and substantiated by references to language and language use. These Scots judged man's creation and use of language, and his ability to formulate and act upon a conception of morality, as mirroring each another, sustaining each other and, as a result, inevitably coalescing in man's constitution. Language itself came to be regarded within their theories as the means and medium by which an individual comes to understand and refine moral sentiments. Having utilised language as a tool to validate their conclusions about the nature and character of man's morality, they go on to maintain that a mastery of language was a vital tool in moral refinement. Given these suppositions, the investigation of morality was greatly aided by a concurrent exploration of language and language use.

As is the case with so many intellectual developments, the stories of these Scots' characterisations of language have their roots in earlier theoretical investigation. Chapter I, therefore, attempts to briefly explore the theoretical developments taking place during the early modern period from which our main protagonists themselves gain much of their formative understanding of language and the insight it offers into man's character. The theories of language proffered by such philosophers as Locke, Hobbes, Pufendorf, Shaftesbury, Addison, Mandeville, and Hutcheson served as the springboards of Hume, Smith and Reid's theories of the relationship between language, thought and social mores. For the undermining of the existing Christian paradigm during the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries precipitated new lines of enquiry into the origin, nature, and influence of language. In relation to the nature and limitations of man's mind, we find that debate between the rationalist and empiricist schools came to have a profound effect on the epistemology of the period. Each school also championed a dramatically different model of the origin and character of language. Questions as to the origin of language, the degree to which language was dependent on reason and the ability of language to accurately reflect thought all came to be points of contention. In turn, the writings of Locke and the Port Royal scholars all came to have a lasting influence in regards to how best to characterise the epistemological implications of language in shaping man's constitution.

The subversion of the established Christian conception of man's nature also resulted in an effort during this period to construct a new, secular-based explanation of man's social and moral character. The question as to whether man was by nature inherently selfish or altruistic came to play a central role in how best to characterise the motivation behind man's willingness to enter into social relations with his fellow man. Once again, a theory of the nature and influence of language was used to help justify the competing positions relating to man's social and moral character. But in this case, it was the centrality of the role of language in facilitating social interaction, rather than as a tool of epistemological enquiry, which came to play such a central role in the gaining an understanding of man's

nature. How and why man engages his fellow man in conversation in a sociable manner was deemed significant in discovering the intention behind such interaction. As a result, the implications of language in influencing the formation of man's social and moral character came to hold a central place within the theories of Pufendorf, Shaftesbury, Addison, Mandeville, and Hutcheson. By first undertaking an exploration of the nature of the linguistic discourse taking place during the period, it will be shown that the general premises being discussed about language seem to have manifest themselves in a greater or lesser degree in the thinking of Hume, Smith and Reid.

What make the endeavours by Hume, Smith and Reid noteworthy are their efforts to merge the increasing epistemological and social concern with language and language use into a means by which to illustrate, substantiate and corroborate their conclusions relating to man's moral and social constitution. With the character of both the mind and society representing perhaps the most pressing issues developed and debated during the Enlightenment, language came to play an important role in these Scots' efforts to construct a 'Science of Man'. Acknowledged as the linchpin of man's cognitive as well as social nature, it will be argued here that Hume, Smith and Reid realised that linguistic assumptions were significant in supporting their conclusions of human nature, and that it was therefore constructive to intertwine an analysis of language, sociability, and morality together in order to make their theories operable. Sometimes taking place in isolation, but more often integrated into their general discussion, the way these Scots coloured their characterisation of language ultimately dictated the outcome of their social and moral theories.

In order to trace the development of this line of inquiry, Chapter II explores the degree to which David Hume incorporated references to language into his moral and social theory. Hume is recognised as one of the pre-eminent minds of the Scottish Enlightenment, and as such, must be addressed in relation to the nexus between language, sociability and morality in eighteenth-century Scotland. Seen as

the very embodiment of the intellectual movement taking place during this period, Hume's contribution to the development of a 'Science of Man' is rightly seen as perhaps the high water mark of the Scottish Enlightenment. If a noteworthy correlation between social, moral and language theory did take place within the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume's involvement in, contribution to, or perhaps ultimate abstention from, such an endeavour must be addressed.

It will be argued that due to Hume's emphasis on the role of custom and convention in shaping man's social and moral character leads Hume to use references to language to help substantiate and validate this claim. As a result of this fact, it becomes apparent that Hume in fact did see language as playing an influential role in the formation of man's social and moral character. This thesis will explore the degree to which this effort on the part of Hume was a success, and how his changing orientation toward language came to colour his writings on morality throughout his career. It will also explore the implication of Hume's contention that the existence of language is simply an historical fact and, having already been constituted, the associated conclusion on the part of Hume that the language of morals is a pre-existing socially constructed reality which the individual must utilise in the formation of his or her own passions and moral judgements. In addition, the central role of utility in the formation of this conception of language will be examined, as will the accusations of scepticism and relativism that were levelled against Hume in relation to his contention that linguistic constructs are of central importance in shaping man's social and moral character.

In light of these observations on Hume, Chapters III and IV will explore the role the discussion of language had in the social and moral theory of Adam Smith. It will be argued that, in a very real sense, Smith's theory of moral sentiments can best be characterised a theory drawing inspiration from the contemporary premises about the nature of language being proffered in the eighteenth century. His presentation of the formation and dissemination of sentiments through his Spectator

and Impartial Spectator model mirrors to a remarkable degree the basic linguistic premises put forward by both English and French philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relating to their discussion of the formation and development of language use by mankind. This thesis seeks to explore both the degree to which Smith's moral theory shadowed contemporary conceptions of the origin and dissemination of language, as well as where his conception of language parted ways with the ones presented by Hume and Reid.

On the one hand Smith maintained that man has an inherent desire to communicate and receive sympathy from other people, and on the other, man is faced with the inherent difficulty in clearly and accurately communicating these feelings due to the amorphous nature of sentiments. It is this struggle to find an acceptable neutral and communally recognisable conception of morality, while maintaining the innately personal nature of morality that lies at the heart of Smith's entire theory. We will therefore explore to what degree this effort on the part of Smith was a success.

Lastly, in Chapter V we shall turn our attention to Thomas Reid's discussions of linguistics and how his observations on this topic impacted his efforts to refute what he saw as misguided moral theory arising from both the works of Hume and Smith. Reid is offered as not only another example of the importance of language in the development of moral theory within the Scottish Enlightenment, but perhaps more importantly, as evidence of how central the role of language was in his efforts to challenge the theories of Hume and Smith. By basing so much of his opposition to both Hume and Smith on distinctly linguistic grounds, Reid highlights the importance of the characterisation of language within the intellectual enterprise undertaken by the Scottish Enlightenment. It will be argued that Reid realised that there was no better way to undermine the intellectual foundations and moral theories presented by Hume and Smith, than by discrediting their use and conception of language. This chapter will explore linguistic tools utilised on the part of Reid to substantiate his claims and turn the tide of scepticism.

CHAPTER I

Epistemology, Sociability and Language: Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century Theoretical Influences on the Scottish Enlightenment

Before undertaking an analysis of Hume's, Smith's and Reid's characterisations of language and its relationship to their conceptions of morality and sociability, it is first necessary to briefly examine some of the dramatic changes taking place during the early modern period that were to have a profound effect upon these three theorists. Shaken to its very core by the subversion of the received truths of Christendom in the wake of the Great Schism and Reformation, the established epistemological and ethical systems of Western Europe faced doubts which wrought asunder the very fabric of man's understanding of himself. With the collapse of this established system of understanding, we witness a period of exceptional intellectual and social change that came to undermine assumptions relating to every level of man's existence. This chapter focuses on those concepts and individuals who are recognised as making important contributions to the shaping of this new mode of human understanding and from which the Scots drew inspiration in their own attempts to contribute to the reconstruction of this intellectual and spiritual void.

More specifically, it is necessary here to examine the individual theories and intellectual trends of the early modern period which provided the minds of the Scottish Enlightenment with the intellectual framework on which they would come to build their own unique understanding of the influence of language on every element of man's character. For perhaps the most pressing requisite in this effort to reconstruct man's understanding of himself was the need to address those elements of human nature that made man so unique. The most obviously distinguishable of these attributes was man's ability to communicate verbally, interact socially, and to regulate his personal actions morally. In each case, language

was seen as playing an essential role. This being the case, it became increasingly apparent that if a successful secular-based understanding of man's character was to be proffered, it would be necessary to fully and adequately address the central distinguishing trait of man, namely, the use of language, as well as the limitations and facilitation offered by that medium.

In order to address this growing awareness as to what language and language use reveals about man's social and moral character, we will examine in this chapter the growth of two essentially discreet lines of inquiry which attempted to address this question. The first of these was an epistemological effort to construct a new account of the origin and impact of language on the development of the human mind, along with the attributes of mankind that emanated from this capacity. The second focused on the fabrication of a new secular explanation of man's sociable and moral nature in relation to his willing interaction with his fellow man. In both cases, the nature and influence of language, in one form or another, became a central issue of contention. This chapter addresses how these two essentially distinct strands of enquiry into the nature of language developed during the early modern period.

It is a central contention of this thesis that it is the deliberate coalescence of these two primary lines of investigation within the Scottish Enlightenment which resulted in the formulation of a 'Science of Man' that drew upon consistent series of references to language and language use in order to illustrate, substantiate, and validate its conclusions. Due to these three theorists attempts to harmonise the epistemological implications of language with the development of the human character, as well as their recognition of the central role verbal discourse played in the shaping of society and morality, Scottish moral theorists such as Hume, Smith and Reid came to see language as playing a central role in any adequate explanation of man's unique moral character. For these Scots, the triumvirate of epistemology, sociability, and morality critically came together through the medium of language, thus making each theorist's conception of language an

insightful tool in gaining an understanding of their conception of mankind in general, and more specifically their conception of morality.

1. Linguistic Crossroads: Rationalism, Empiricism, and the Ascendancy of Secular Language Theory

The epistemological investigations of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were marked by a profuse number of treatises that drew attention to the phenomena of language.¹ Traditionally the providence of an insular group of medieval grammarians, the discussion of the nature and impact of language became not only of increasing interest among writers who might loosely be termed 'linguists', but also, if not mainly, the concern of philosophers and scientists of the age. As a result, in contrast to the severely practical and didactic investigation of language pursued by the medieval grammarians, we witness the emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of a methodology that recognised language as one of the key factors in shaping the structure of human thought.

This proliferation of interest in language can be traced to a number of separate but related tensions. Perhaps the most critical of these were the dramatic theological changes which swept across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In aftermath of the Great Schism, the Christian community of Europe was shaken to its very core. No longer could the irrefutable and immutable state of man's nature be taken for granted. Likewise, the rise of Protestantism, and its creed of direct personal understanding of the word of God, added a new uncertainty to scriptural interpretation and undermined the faith in the Latin *clavis universalis* that had for centuries held together man's understanding of his Creator and himself. The deterioration of Latin as the catholic language of Christendom in turn led to community breakdown and a growing realisation that the mass of humanity was

¹ Giulio Lepschy (ed.), *History of Linguistics: Vol. III: Renaissance and Early Modern Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1998).

moving into a period in which they felt increasingly isolated from both God and their fellow man. As a result, this religious anxiety and civil strife were to shatter forever the naive security of Western Europe.

Amidst this general breakdown, we witness two events which are of particular interest to us here. The first was the emergence of the vernacular to full recognition in the wake of the undermining of Latin as the universal language of Western Europe. While Latin continued to be used in some quarters, the rise in the status of European vernaculars, coupled with the increase in secular learning, resulted in the establishment of national languages as important mediums for scholarly and scientific investigation. It was now within men's power to employ the language of the 'vulgar', an ability that would inevitably prove to be as dynamic as it was momentous.²

The second major casualty of this transition was the increased doubt regarding the sanctity of the biblical explanation of the origin and history of language. Up to the seventeenth century, scholars had maintained that Genesis presented indisputable proof that God had infused the first language into Adam, who had spoken a 'natural language' in which words delineated the nature of things themselves. Since language was a gift from God, it also necessarily followed that language was also perfect. This Adamic language was thought to have flourished in post-deluvial ancient Hebrew, when the entire world spoke but one language. It was only due to the hubris of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel that this divine and universal language was lost to the mass of humanity.

Even in the wake of this unfortunate event, it was widely maintained that the *Lingua Humana* had remained uncorrupted even after the Confusion of the Tongues at Babel, and that the pure form of ancient Hebrew still existed and was waiting to be re-discovered in some distant corner of the globe in all its divine

² The language of the 'vulgar' will be of particular importance in the work of Thomas Reid, discussed in Ch. VI of this thesis.

purity. The only real area of controversy was where it was to be found, and how to correctly trace its fate through the Old Testament in order for it to be located once again. This Adamic explanation of language held sway in Western Europe well into the seventeenth century, but grew weaker and weaker as the eighteenth century approached. As with so much of the traditions and received knowledge of the period, the collapse of catholic hegemony of the Roman Church marked a corresponding collapse in the acceptance of this received Adamic explanation of the origin and nature of language.

With the acceptance of the biblical explanation of the origins of language increasingly being rejected, there arose not one, but two alternative schools of thought. Proffering rival conceptions of the origins and implications of language and language use, they would come to dominate the intellectual climate of Western Europe, in one form or another, up to the present day. As we will see, the struggle for the intellectual high ground between what would come to be known as the rationalist and empiricist schools during the seventeenth and eighteenth century would lead to two distinct, and dramatically different, methodologies for the examination of human nature. As a result, the advocates of each school proffered dramatically different explanations as to the origin of language as well as the influence of language on man's constitution. It was from the ensuing debate between these rival schools of thought that many writers of the Scottish Enlightenment were to draw inspiration for their own construction of the influence of language on the formation of man's character.

The rationalist school traces its roots back to Plato's dialogue, *Theaetetus*, and was later championed by Descartes and his followers. The central tenet of rationalism is that it is the irrefutable truths of human reason, rather than the impressions of the senses, which holds the key to the finding of the certainty of knowledge.³ Descartes famous contention *Cogito ergo sum* encapsulates the idea

³ Pieter Seuren, Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) p. 48.

that though we may know our own thinking, and with it the realisation of our own existence, there is nothing beyond this which can be known. Cartesian rationalism thus contends that it is impossible to prove the reality of the outside world as well as the reality of facts in general. In order, therefore, for man to have any understanding, the rationalist perspective reduces the role of perception and of empirical data in the characterisation of human knowledge in favour of emphasising innate cognitive structures known as 'innate ideas'. These innate ideas were then set into action by the stimulus of the otherwise unknowable outside world, in order to make comprehensible the world around us. Thus, humans are judged to gain knowledge through analytical, *a priori*, deduction.

Based on these general overarching premises, the rationalist of the early modern period argued that thought was independent of language and language was nothing but the rule governed expression of existing thought. Accordingly, man's possession of innate ideas, as well as his ability to make varied sounds, naturally and rapidly led to the existence of a spoken language. Language, in this view, is itself an innate capacity, the necessary expression of man's innate reason. It was not necessary, therefore, either to re-create the circumstances in which language first occurred, or to suppose a long period of gradual development.

The rationalist perspective on language was enthusiastically endorsed in some quarters during the seventeenth century, particularly in relation to grammar. The Jansenist intellectuals of the Port Royal are one of the most notable examples. Established in France as a religious and educational foundation in 1637, and disbanded due to political and religious strife in 1661, the Port Royal's influence on educational ideas lasted well into the early nineteenth century. In the wake of the institutionalisation of scientific study throughout Europe, the Port Royal writers began to pursue grammar as a distinct area of scientific enquiry. The most notable works relating to language to emerge from this effort were *Grammaire* by Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot (1660), and the *Logique* by Pierre Nicole and

Antoine Arnauld, (1662). These two works provide a lucid account of the rationalist assumptions relating to language, and serve as an unparalleled archetype of this school of thought.

The rationalist grammar that arose out of the Port Royal was in many ways a successor to the medieval scholastic grammatical tradition. For example, the Port Royal wrote extensively on universal grammar and explored existing languages such as Latin and French. Unlike the medievalists, however, the Port Royal grammarians stressed the use of human reason over received authority, thus making Descartes rather than Aristotle the basis of their system.⁴ Their goal was to reveal the universal grammatical structures which underlie particular languages, and the role these structures played in the communication of thought.

The main thrust of the Port Royal investigation of language focused on determining the degree to which reason is reflected in language and how, in contrast, in some ways language departed from reason. Given this objective, language is seen as having a particular feature or characteristic because of the rational demands that are placed on it. The primary function of speaking was characterised as being the communication of thoughts. Since thought was seen as independent of both language and experience, it followed that mankind had been driven to invent verbal communication in order to signify their thoughts. The only way speech could successfully perform this task was by actually mirroring the structure of the thoughts being expressed by the speaker. As a result, the Port Royal scholars presented a conception of linguistic rationalism in which the structure of thought determines the structure of verbal expression.⁵ Drawing on a universal pool of human thought which was immutably expressed through these perceptual signs, man was able to communicate with his fellow man as part of his general rational faculty.

⁴ R. H. Robins, A Short History of Linguistics (London: Longman, 1990) p. 123.

⁵ Roy Harris and Talbot J Taylor, Landmarks in Linguistic Thought: Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure (London: Routledge, 1989) pp. 99 - 100.

Given this characterisation of language, grammar was defined by the Port Royal scholars as the art of speaking which allowed thought to be expressed clearly. In this sense, grammar was very much an activity, rather than a system of rules, words, or sentences. It was also their contention that thoughts, regardless of the linguistic medium chosen by the speaker, have the same properties, and thus are inherent in the rationality of the human mind. If one is to master the art of speaking, one must first endeavour to understand the structure of thoughts that they intend to convey. This knowledge of thought would reveal the basic universal categories and rules of all languages, which in turn could be used to facilitate the mastery of the specific language in question.⁶

Therefore, the goal of the Port Royal scholars was to essentially separate the wheat of the universals of pure reason from the chaff of individual linguistic irregularities. The former were to be identified and developed into the arts of speaking, while the latter, which evolve from custom and human agreement, were to be neither explained nor justified. This distinction was substantiated by the contention that usage could vary unpredictably from language to language and, as a result, these variations could only be explained by grammar books tailored to those specific linguistic idiosyncrasies that could not be clarified by an appeal to rational principles of thought. In turn, rational grammar could not be used to explain these differences, for they are learned by rote and therefore not reducible to the formation of thought as are general grammatical principles. The resulting framework of the Port Royal grammar was therefore kept in a state of tension by permanent conflict between the needs of reason and the pressure of usage and human needs.⁷

Characteristically, the Port Royal rationalist did not offer any discussion regarding the 'origin' or gradual development of language. They assumed, based on their determination that language was the direct expression of universal, and

⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

⁷ Lepsky, p. 168 - 169. Another notable commentator on language emerging from the rationalist school was Beauzée. More pragmatic than the Port Royal grammarians, Beauzée maintained that the grammar of a particular language represented a merging of the universal grammatical structure as arising from the nature

presumably perfect, rational thought, that language was conceived as the direct reflex of the structure and process of thought. Only vocalisation was therefore necessary in order to become a comprehensible form of speech. Consistent with the rationalist paradigm generally, the origin of language was therefore explained by the Port Royal scholars within the theory of language itself.

For many, however, the rationalist's need for *a priori* deduction proved to be too sterile. In contrast to the rationalists, these theorists argued that there was a need to hold a *rationally unproved* faith in our senses and of human experience generally. As a result, in opposition to rationalism emerged, particularly in Britain, a school of empirical thinking which maintained that human knowledge derives from the experience of sensory data which reflected the world accurately enough to enable man to function in it. Based on this premise, these empiricists, as they would come to be known, emphasised the role of experience in learning and attempted to minimise the role of innate ideas or other innate structures of the human mind.

The empiricist school's interest in language can be traced to their more general interest in the origin of human culture and what one scholar succinctly termed the 'archaeology of human knowledge'.⁸ While the rationalist had a ready-made explanation for the impulse to use language, the empiricists had to find an alternative explanation grounded in man's experience. This alternative approach to language required them to explain just how, based on man's needs and capacities, language could have evolved as a functional tool. In order to accomplish this task, the empiricist philosophers were forced to re-build linguistic theory from the ground up. In so doing, they were forced to grapple with nearly every aspect of human nature and development in order to explain how man could have created language from non-existence as well as to trace its development into the keystone of civilised society.

of human thought as with the arbitrary conventions which arose within a given linguistic group.

⁸ Ibid., p. 154.

The most dramatic manifestation of the empiricist exploration of language was the shift away from speculation about objects of thought toward speculation about the mechanics of thought. This change of emphasis was to have a profound effect on the entire philosophical approach to the study of the origin and development of language during the 18th Century and beyond.⁹ For the eighteenth-century empiricists, exploration of linguistics attempted to explain not only how the mind operated, but also how and why man acquired knowledge.¹⁰ By adopting this approach to language, the empiricists ushered in the idea of language as a natural phenomenon.¹¹ Empiricism also stressed the individual variations of particular languages and the essential need to adjust categories based on observation. This stood in contrast to the rationalists who focused on the universal sub-structures present in all languages. Therefore, the empiricists offered a starkly contrasting view of the nature of language, implying that language itself is one of the factors in shaping thought. For the empiricists' abandonment of the Cartesian conception of thought necessarily resulted in their rejection of the idea that language is 'merely' an expression of that thought.

Another major outgrowth of this shift in focus manifested itself in various naturalist speculations as to the origin of language. This was due to the fact that the empiricists assumed that language must have arisen from some sort of pre-rational, primitive need for communication and expression.¹² It is in this search for a pre-rational need or desire on the part of mankind to communicate with one another that ushers in the empiricist school's emphasis on the relationship between language and the expression of the passions. For many empiricists, the transition from instinctive emotive connection to artificial controlled articulation of sounds was seen as a decisive element in unlocking the nature of man's constitution.¹³ As

⁹ William Knight, Lord Monboddo and Some of His Contemporaries (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1900) p. 148.

¹⁰ Juliard p. 43.

¹¹ See, William Knight pp. 146 - 148.

¹² Seuren, p. 76.

¹³ It is also important to note that, while the rarified analysis of language proffered by the rationalists might

a result, the degree to which language can be linked to an emotive, rather than rational, need to make inter-personal communication was presented as a critical area of investigation.

The struggle to provide just this sort of an empirically based explanation of language began toward the end of the seventeenth century. Perhaps the most influential early modern empirical investigation of language was formulated by John Locke. Locke's influence on the philosophy and study of language was immense during the eighteenth century, and this was recognised by nearly all those who later wrote on the subject.¹⁴ Although Locke, in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,¹⁵ did not address directly the problem of the origin of language, he did devote a section of it, Book III, to what he called 'language and words in general', thus placing the problem of language at the centre of his epistemology.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that it had not been a part of Locke's original plan to include a chapter on language. As he had initially envisaged the *Essay*, he intended to move straight from Book II to what is now Book IV; that is, from a discussion of how the mind gets its materials to a discussion of how those materials make knowledge. During the writing of Book I and II, however, he evidently realised the close connection between words and ideas.¹⁷ Having spent so much time explaining how we arrive at our ideas, he seemed to have considered it necessary to devote some effort to explain the method by which they are expressed.¹⁸

very well have needed redressing, the alternative empiricist methodology championed during the period did not lend itself to certain areas of linguistic analysis. The major stumbling block was that linguistics had no empirical access to the history of language beyond the oldest written texts. Yet, the use of language was so central to man's social nature that it could hardly be ignored in the construction of anything resembling a truly comprehensive 'science of man'. What resulted from this conundrum was an eclectic mixture of empirical analysis and fantastic speculation regarding the origin and nature of language that would come to colour the works of Hume, Smith, and Reid in the eighteenth century.

¹⁴ Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure, Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983) p. 284.

¹⁵ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1877).

¹⁶ Aarsleff p. 284.

¹⁷ Locke, II.XXXIII.19.

¹⁸ John Jenkins, *Understanding Locke* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983) p. 155.

Unlike the philosophers of the eighteenth century, Locke adhered to the traditional theory of the origin of language, that is, he presumed that man was intended by his Creator to live in society and was therefore endowed with language, which Locke judged to be the common tie of society. Nevertheless, Locke did not believe that man had been given a complete language by God at the time of the Creation. Instead, he contended that, while man was physically equipped to form articulated sounds, the mere combination of these sounds into words was not sufficient to be considered a language. He argued that language only arose once words were made to represent 'internal conceptions' of ideas.¹⁹

Initially, Locke maintained that there was indeed no reason for these articulated sounds to be transformed into language, since man was perfectly capable of reflecting and reasoning without it. He argued that all our ideas were independent of words and that humans were able to understand the whole range of experience and thought without language. For Locke, the primary form of discourse was mental discourse which needs only to make use of ideas. Language was seen as nothing more than the means whereby this discourse could be made public. Had we no need to communicate, language would have never been invented; and its invention makes no difference to the range of our thought.²⁰

For Locke, the reason for the existence of language was to be explained by man's social need to communicate and share his thoughts. It is by means of language that the ideas of one mind are transferred to the mind of another. "Man", he contended, "though he have great variety of Thoughts, and such, from which others, as well as himself, might receive Profit and Delight; yet they are all within his own Breast, invisible, and hidden from others, nor made to appear. The Comfort, and Advantage of Society, not being to be had without Communication of Thoughts, it was necessary, that Man should find out some external sensible Signs,

¹⁹ Locke, III.I.1 and III.II.8.

²⁰ John Colman, *John Locke's Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983) p. 117.

whereby those invisible Ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others.”²¹ While not elaborated on by Locke, it is clear that in his view, it was man’s desire to share his inner feelings and derive comfort from others which drove him to formulate language.

The process by which this takes place was presented by Locke as follows: verbal communication is a matter of one individual uttering words (articulate sounds) which that individual has affixed to the private idea making up a thought in his or her mind, and other individuals hearing the words, and then translating them into the appropriate correlating idea in their mind. It is obviously a precondition of successful communication that the speaker affix the same words to the same ideas as does the listener. In order for this to happen, public rules or conventions governing the proper application of words to ideas must be created. These rules governing the application of words to things also serve as constraints with respect to the application of words to private ideas.²² “Words,” maintained Locke, “being no man’s private possession, but the common measure of Commerce and Communication, ‘tis not for anyone, at pleasure, to change the Stamp they are current in; nor alter the Ideas they are affixed to.”²³ In addition, Locke contended that speakers always assume that their words are also signs of ideas in the mind of their hearers. “For else they should talk in vain,” he said, “and could not be understood, if the Sounds they allied to one Idea, were such, as by the Hearer, were applied to another, which is to speak two languages.”²⁴

Locke was aware of the important connection between words and things, and of the role that observation of the objective world played in providing a checking procedure for the correct use of language.²⁵ To affix words to our ideas we must first have acquired those ideas through experience. In order to gain control over language, man observes those about him using words to refer to things of which he

²¹ Locke, III.II.1.

²² Colman p. 110 - 111.

²³ Locke III.xi.II.

²⁴ Ibid., III.ii.4.

has ideas. In this manner the word-idea connections established within the individual's mind are correlated to the conventions governing word-thing connection utilised by society at large. The presumption in linguistic communication is that both the speaker and the hearer have followed this procedure in affixing words to their ideas.²⁶

Central to this entire process is a clear and accurate use of signs to mark specific ideas in the speaker's mind. Locke holds the difference between intelligent discourse and the mere utterance of words is that, in the first case, words are marks which the speaker uses as signs of his ideas. If the speaker uses the words in the various contexts in which it is appropriate to use them, and he does not use them in inappropriate contexts, his discourse is meaningful. This was what Locke termed the 'common acception' of words.²⁷ Locke suggested that this grasp of the rules of language use steadily grew in the individual over time. This progress was demonstrated in a variety of ways, but was especially vivid in a child gaining command of language. For instance, in book two of the *Essay* Locke notes: "[W]hen children have, by repeated sensations, got ideas fixed in their memories, they begin by degrees to learn the use of signs. And when they have got the skill to apply the organs of speech to the framing of articulated sounds, they begin to make use of words to signify their ideas to others."²⁸ As we will see later, Smith drew a similar parallel in regard to the development of a child and its growing mastery of the communication of moral sentiments.

For the purposes of this dissertation, we must now concentrate our attention on how Locke's system of linguistic rules related to the communication of the passions and moral sentiments. In Book II, which dealt with the formation of ideas, Locke discussed how we as individuals come to be aware of the passions. It was his opinion that the passions revolved around the sensation, and reflection upon,

²⁵ Jenkins p. 161.

²⁶ Colman p. 110 - 111.

²⁷ Locke III.II.7.

²⁸ Ibid., II.xi.8.

pleasure and pain. This being the case, ideas of the passions can be formulated, “if we reflect on ourselves, and observe how these, under various considerations, operate in us - what modifications or tempers of mind, what internal sensations (if I may call them that) they produce in us, - we may thence form to ourselves the ideas of our passions.”²⁹ Locke maintained that those passions derived solely from the personal experience of either pleasure or pain - joy, sorrow, hope, and fear, for example - are universal passions shared by all men. On the other hand, passions such as anger and envy, which involved “the mixed consideration of ourselves and others” necessitate a value judgement. These ‘mixed passions’ do not bring about an immediate instinctive reaction, and are thus not universal.³⁰ This was considered by Locke to be an important distinction, and it is clear that he maintained that the effort needed to form ideas about the latter was more complex.

It is also interesting to note that, while Locke included a section in Book II on the formulation of ideas regarding the passions, in his discussion of language found in Book III he did not explain the means by which such ideas are communicated. He did, however, draw attention to the inherent difficulties in expressing abstract ideas such as morals. Locke specifically characterised the concept of morals as a ‘mixed mode’, by which he means that morals are made up of a combination of ideas which the mind puts together of its own choice.³¹ Since in Locke’s theory any given signifier has no logical connection to the idea being expressed, the idea which one is trying to express must have been “learned and retained by those who would exchange thoughts and hold intelligible discourse with others, in any language”.³²

Locke observed that communication breakdown between individuals occurred when the signification of an idea was in doubt.³³ This happens when a word “does

²⁹ Ibid., II.XX.3.

³⁰ Ibid., II.XX.14

³¹ Ibid., III.XI.14. The opposite of a mixed mode is a simple idea which can be derived, usually from a physical object, the signifier from a single source.

³² Ibid., III.II.5.

³³ Ibid., III.II.4.

not excite in the hearer the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the speaker.”³⁴ In the case of mixed modes such as morals, the ability to express the combination of ideas in one’s head to another individual, who must necessarily have the exact same combination of ideas in his head, makes the chances of effective communication much more difficult. Locke further argued that this type of communication breakdown most often occurs when the ideas are very complex, have no settled standard, or have a standard that is hard to know, or when the signification of the word and the real essence of the thing are not exactly the same.³⁵ With regard to morals, all of these criteria are applicable. As a result, Locke went on to acknowledge the fact that these factors contribute greatly to the difficulty man experiences in communicating his ideas of morality: “Hence it comes to pass, that men’s names, of very compounded ideas, such as for the most part are moral words, have seldom, in two different men, the same precise signification; since one man’s complex idea seldom agrees with another’s, and often differs from his own, from that which he had yesterday or will have tomorrow.”³⁶

But regardless of all the difficulties which might stand in the way of the effective communication of morals, Locke believed that there was a simple solution: precise definitions. He maintained that no matter how difficult or complex an idea concerning morals might be, there was always a way to establish a precise definition that dictated its correct use. While there may be several ideas which the mind has put together, “men may, if they please, exactly know the ideas that go to each composition, and so use these words in a certain and undoubted signification, and perfectly declare, when there is occasion, what they stand for.”³⁷ He went on to say that this process could be expedited if those writing about moral discourse were to define their terms clearly and precisely.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., III.II.4.

³⁵ Ibid., III.II.5.

³⁶ Ibid., III.II.6.

³⁷ Ibid., III.XI.15.

In order to support his claims, Locke presented the reader with what he sees as a perfect example of this process in action: justice. He asserted that the general feasibility of defining moral ideas was given credence by the successful formulation of clear and precise definitions in relation to the virtue of justice. In all its permutations, the idea of justice is readily accessible to communication and all men know what it means to act justly and when they have been a victim of injustice. Therefore justice, in Locke's opinion, was a perfect example of the ability of man in the area of morals to create, by precise definition, a comprehensive system made up of adequate signifiers to express complex moral ideas.³⁹ As we will see, the virtue of justice came to play a particularly important role in the theories of both Hume and Smith. However, these latter theorists' conclusions regarding justice's unique character, as well as its impact on the ability to set fast rules in regard to the other virtues, were more nuanced and less categorical than the conclusions drawn by Locke. In turn, the relationship between language use and man's moral character would also come to be characterised differently.

However, while these Scots might have come to different conclusions regarding the relationship between language and morality, Locke's analysis of language and language use contained many of the core ideas which were to be expanded upon during the following century. For man's use of verbal communication as the primary means of expressing ideas, particularly moral ideas, were of the greatest importance to the Enlightenment authors being considered here. As we shall see, Locke's rejection of innate notions' marked a fundamental break from both the Adamic and rational doctrine, a fact that would come to play an important part in the theories relating to this subject proffered by both Hume and Smith. Locke language was neither divine nor innate, but rather was created by man for the convenience of communicating his internal conceptions.⁴⁰ This being the case,

³⁸ Ibid., III.XI. 15 and 16.

³⁹ As we will in Chapter IV, Smith maintained that justice was the only moral sentiment which lent itself to the formation of such precise definitions.

⁴⁰ Ibid., III.I.2.

language was characterised as a social institution that reflects the world of its speakers. It was this fundamental philosophical conclusion that came to be a keystone in the building of a new conception of man by these Scots in the following century.

2. Secular Ethics and the Influence of 'Polite Society': The Importance of Language as a Practical Tool of Socialisation

Having examined the changing face of linguistic epistemology during the early modern period, we must now turn our attention to the concurrent developments taking place in ethics. For this period's disillusionment with biblical infallibility also precipitated what was to become the greatest revision of ethical principles since the ascendancy of Christianity. As a result, a profusion of new theories on state, law, and society burst forth, based not on divine authority, but rather on premises derived from human nature. Once again, we witness that great emphasis was placed on the impact of language and language use in creating and maintaining these secular ethical theories.

As in early modern epistemology, in the wake of the destruction of the existing biblically based conception of man's unique temperament, we can distinguish two competing visions of how best to characterise man's sociable and ethical nature. On the one hand, as we will expand on below, we witness the development of what could be loosely termed the 'selfish' or 'ego-centric' school. Championed by the likes of Hobbes and Mandeville, these individuals contended that man was, in the end, a self-interested person who came into society only as a matter of self-preservation. In opposition to this line of reasoning there arose the 'sociable' or 'altruistic' school of man's nature. Championed by the likes of Shaftesbury, Addison and Hutcheson, these individuals presented an alternative vision of man, one who was either born with a sense of social affinity or who, at the very least, could learn social values and stick to them. By maintaining that man had a benevolent feeling for the species as a whole, it followed that a man's actions were not governed by selfishness or punishments, but rather by thinking about the social

responsibility he felt as a natural part of his being. Based on this premise, man did not come into society because he *had* to do so; man came into society because he *wanted* to do so.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one outgrowth of this controversy over the proper characterisation of man's sociability was an interest in language, since language is the essential medium by which social relations are constructed. Importantly, however, this new line of enquiry concentrated upon a different element of language than we witnessed in the previous section regarding the rationalist/empiricist debate. Rather than focusing on language as a cognitive operation, both the 'selfish' school and the 'altruistic' school focused their attention on language as the medium of social interaction, characterising language and language use as a vehicle that enabled man to fulfil his inherent desires, be they either selfish or altruistic. Thus, as in the emerging epistemological debate, we see within the concurrent ethical debate's recognition of the importance of an understanding of language and language use; in this case, its usefulness in gaining an understanding of man's moral character.

In order to understand the context of this discussion of language in the area of ethics we must first look at the various individuals who associated with this area of inquiry and of whom we know the Scots under discussion in this thesis were familiar. As noted above, Thomas Hobbes is widely recognised as the father of what might be termed the 'selfish theory of mankind'. Writing in the aftermath of the English Civil Wars, this English philosopher is credited with the earliest self-conscious attempt to construct a 'science' of civil society from first principles. In his seminal work *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes presented a theory of society based on first principles derived from assumptions of what man would be like in a state of nature devoid of all political, social and moral authority. In order to create this vision of man's distant past, Hobbes employed deductive reasoning to discover these first principles of man's nature. This was done in the hope of drawing a distinction between the artificial, meaning that which was made by man, and the

natural, meaning that which was to be found in the physical world. Hobbes maintained that man could have certain knowledge only of what men had either created or made. For example, Hobbes asserted that man could understand geometric theorems because he himself had created them. In like manner, Hobbes asserted that man could gain an understanding of civil society because man had created it as well.

Hobbes is best remembered for his dictum positing that in a state of nature, all men would be so pre-occupied with self-preservation that there would be nothing but unmitigated strife. However, since man possessed reason, which allowed him to know the causes of things, he was able to discover principles of conduct that could be followed in order to secure his personal safety. Therefore, although following these principles was done consciously, it is crucial to note that, it was not done as a result of any sense of natural affinity or love for our fellow man, but rather out of the necessity of self-preservation.

This image of man's nature offered by Hobbes was a disturbing one, perhaps made even more so because of the well reasoned argument he presented. Even in our own day, the haunting presence of the Leviathan is inexorably associated with the arch-type of that side of our humanity which we would rather forget, or at least would like to reason away. This was no less true for the Scots of the eighteenth century. With the sounds of furious condemnation still ringing in their ears, and perhaps lingering personal uncertainties in their minds, the shadow of the Hobbes' Leviathan still loomed large over their thinking.

In contrast to the Hobbes, there was another line of theoretical enquiry that developed in early modern Europe which presented an alternative explanation of man's social character. In order to discuss this alternative theory, the most logical place to begin is with the work of eminent jurist Samuel Pufendorf. A German Protestant, Pufendorf devoted the first part of his career to the re-working of a

sociably based construction of natural law ideology.⁴¹ Building upon the Jurassic traditions of Hugo Grotius, Pufendorf attempted to present a comprehensive moral philosophy based on natural law and suited to the conditions of modern Europe and one which would gain consensus of all Europeans regardless of their confessional differences.⁴² The impact of Pufendorf cannot be underestimated. He was widely read and taught both on the continent as well as in Britain, with the theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment particularly sensitive to his theoretical premises.

While Hobbes was writing during a period devastated by war and insecurity, Pufendorf came onto the scene in wake of the Treaty of Westphalia. Writing between 1658 and 1677, Pufendorf attempted to reconstruct the natural law tradition within a secular context, thus shifting the focus of natural law jurisprudence toward an interest in answering the question as to how one best conduct oneself so as to become a useful member of society. His effort to clearly and decisively isolate human behaviour for study distinguished his work from both his mentor Hugo Grotius and Hobbes, as does his attempt to construct a social theory which assured peace and order.

In order to develop his theory, Pufendorf appealed not to religion, but to scientifically constructed universal principles. Building upon the works of Grotius, Pufendorf initiated a move away from the traditional lines of Aristotelian and Thomistic natural law as well as the separation of the ideas of natural law from its religious context. Natural law had been equated by Grotius to a set of social duties common to all mankind, rather than the legality of particular states or the moral theology of particular sects of Christianity. Grotius had also argued that the existence of natural law could be demonstrated by the act of reasoning, rather than from any secular or divine authority. By defining a 'state of nature' as an empirically verifiable entity, this new line of enquiry freed itself from any charges of relativism and also freed itself from being tied to any particular theological

⁴¹ Richard Tuck (ed.), *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 156.

⁴² James Tully (intro.), Samuel Pufendorf, *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. xiv, xviii.

tradition. This accessing of man's character through a 'state of nature' further necessitated theoretical abstraction and conjectural history on the part of Pufendorf, an effort which was to have a significant impact on the development of social and moral theory during the next century in Scotland.

The natural law school of jurisprudence also maintained that the purpose behind natural law was to render individual actions useful to other members of society as well as to contain man's moral corruption and inclination toward self-love. This in turn led to the transformation of natural law morality into a *social* theory which focused on the need to channel the actions of self-loving men toward fulfilment of their social duties, thus making them into functioning members of society.⁴³ Narrowing its focus in order to avoid attack from jurists and theologians, this new brand of natural law jurisprudence presented a theory of man's morality independent from moral theology and centred on its own specific vocabulary organised around the concept of sociality.⁴⁴

This secular and social focus was to have a profound impact on Pufendorf's characterisation of man's sociability. Pufendorf conceived of mankind as lacking any innate disposition toward moral actions. Rather, morality was deemed to be an extrinsic concept which was imposed onto mankind. He therefore shared Hobbes' conclusion that man was pre-occupied with self-preservation and that since man is a weak and wretched creature, he cannot gain this security on his own, but must enter into social bonds with his fellow man. However, Pufendorf differed from Hobbes in his contention that man's sociality was not strictly driven by self-love, since this would simply lead to enmity. Nor, in the other extreme, was the coming of man into society the result of natural sympathy for others, which Pufendorf deemed too weak an impulse to drive men to such action.

Man was characterised by Pufendorf as engaging in what Tully refers to as a

⁴³ Ibid., p. xxiii

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. xxii

“strategically other-regarding manner”, in which individual’s act so as not to give any other member of society any reason to cause him harm, and as a result, actually promote and preserve his advantages.⁴⁵ Thus, in order to cultivate this sociability, Pufendorf maintained that it was not enough simply to avoid harming others, as Grotius and Hobbes had maintained. Rather, there was a need to positively affirm other individuals’ equality and dignity so as not to damage their self-esteem. As a result, man must enter into contact and co-operation with others to reach this goal even in the face of his own anti-social passions. In addition, a man in society must be willing to reciprocate positive actions. The resulting benevolent acts emanating from this interaction was seen by Pufendorf as playing a central role in maintaining social cohesion within the society.

Having crucially opened up the possibility of a secular explanation for man’s willingness to enter into society, both Hobbes and Pufendorf established an intellectual framework which was to shape the debate in the following century. However, many assumptions held by these pioneers in social theory were to come into contention. As the new century dawned, the assertion made by Hobbes and Pufendorf, that man’s willingness to enter into society should ultimately be dictated by man’s self-preservation instincts, came to be extremely divisive. A growing number began to contend that the secularisation of society did not necessitate assumptions of less than virtuous motivation for man’s interaction with his fellow man. Man could in fact be sociable, even altruistic, by nature without necessarily falling back onto any divine reasoning to support this reality. It was left to these individuals to formulate an alternative secular explanation for what they saw as man’s innate ethical and social nature.

This unwillingness to see man as being motivated by innate selfishness, or by some sort of contrived sociability, was due in no small part to the fact that the quest for a satisfactory answer to the ‘sociability riddle’ was fast becoming the concern of philosopher and citizen alike. For the debate on the theoretical plane regarding

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. xxvi

the nature and influence of man's social nature was also being scrutinised by a public increasingly captivated by the ideals of 'polite society'. As a result, we witness an era in which both the theoretical and popular culture became pre-occupied with matters of sociability, a fact that would come to have a profound impact on the way language would come to be portrayed within the sociability debate itself.

On the theoretical front, one of the most notable and influential theoretical assertions that man's ability to act politely is an inherent characteristic, came from the pen of Anthony Ashley Cooper, better known as the third earl of Shaftesbury. In his influential work *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, which first appeared in 1711, Shaftesbury opined that man was naturally sociable and possessed an innate moral sense. Re-published throughout the course of the eighteenth century,⁴⁶ this work would come to represent the quintessential defence of man's natural social propensities. As Herder was to comment at the end of the century, "this virtuoso of Humanity [Shaftesbury]... had had a marked influence on the best minds of the century, on those who have striven with determination and sincerity for the true, the beautiful, and the good."⁴⁷ With Shaftesbury being credited with founding the 'moral sense' school of ethics, this comment by Herder seems particularly appropriate in relation to Hume, Reid, and Smith, for whom Shaftesbury would prove to be both influential and problematic.

Focusing on the role of the affections rather than reason as the basis of the 'springs and actions' of man's behaviour, Shaftesbury established an emotional basis for man's social conduct. This marked a significant shift from the seventeenth century rationalist conception of emotion as a merely passive response. The characterisation of the affections as the natural motivating force behind men's actions also went against the egoistic position of the Hobbsian theory that man is

⁴⁶ Anthony Ashley Cooper (3rd earl of Shaftesbury), *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, John M. Robertson (ed.), 2 vols., (New York: Bobbs-Merill Publishers, 1964). Shaftesbury's *Charateristicks* went through eleven editions by 1790.

⁴⁷ Johann G. Von Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, Letter 33 (1794), in *Sämmtliche Werke*,

motivated purely by self-interest. In contrast, Shaftesbury maintained that a number of different social affections as well as impulses of 'self-affection' are to be found within man's nature.

As a result of this methodology, Shaftesbury is credited as the first moral theorist to use psychological experience as a key to understanding man's ethical nature. He rejected Hobbes' contentions relating to man in a state of nature, arguing instead that man is only in a 'natural' state when he has fulfilled his whole potential. In order to realise what the natural state actually entails, Shaftesbury argued that it was necessary to study man as a whole and in terms of his functioning as a social agent.⁴⁸ As the historian Lawrence Klein noted, "sociability was not just an abstract idea for him [Shaftesbury] but a repeated figure, through which the self, philosophy, moral behaviour, writing, and culture could be understood. Images of refined sociability and its opposites - unsociability and distorted sociability - recur in Shaftesbury's writings".⁴⁹

Due to this pre-occupation with sociable interaction, Shaftesbury presented an ethical system in which virtuous actions are distinguished as those which contribute to the common good. Within Shaftesbury's theory, therefore, virtue was associated with those affections which lead toward man becoming an active social agent, and vice the product of the corruption of such affections. In order to propagate virtuous affections, it is important to expose oneself to examples of virtuous interaction, so as to cultivate one's innate orientation toward sociability to its full potential. As a result, Shaftesbury asserted that, " '[t]is the height of sociableness to be thus friendly and communicative'.⁵⁰ Part and parcel of this process is the ability to control and shape the passions in accordance with the correct social reaction in a given situation. In order to do this, it is necessary to know the facts about the situation in which one becomes involved so that one may respond with the

Bernhard Suphan (ed.) (Berlin: Weidmann, 1977), XVIII, p. 158.

⁴⁸ Shaftesbury, p. xxix..

⁴⁹ Klein, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Shaftesbury, p. 62.

appropriate affections.⁵¹ This line of reasoning was to become particularly significant in the moral theory of Adam Smith.

A caveat, however, was offered by Shaftesbury in relation to the cultivation of sociability, one that would come to be a sticking point for many of the scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment, in particular Hume. Shaftesbury asserted that virtues of sociability were governed by a universal standard of right and wrong conduct that was “independent of opinion and above the world”.⁵² For Shaftesbury the greatest threat to virtuous behaviour was to “proceed only from the force of custom and education in opposition to Nature, as may be noted in those countries where, according to custom or politic institution, certain actions naturally run afoul and odious are repeatedly viewed with applause, and honour ascribed to them”.⁵³ While individuals may engage in actions which are considered virtuous within their society, they nevertheless violate the rules of nature if their actions violate these universal norms. Shaftesbury was confident that such actions diminish, though did not ultimately eliminate, man’s internal moral sense. This being the case, though conversation with our fellow man may be one of the most accessible means for cultivating our virtuous character, we are still capable through this social discourse of being misguided “however polite and agreeable their characters may be with whom we converse and correspond”.⁵⁴ For example, Shaftesbury warns individuals to be careful to whom they listen and to what they read, for fear that our “studies are ill chosen”.⁵⁵ As we will see in Chapter V, this concern on the part of Shaftesbury will be reflected in Smith’s worry regarding the potential dangers of ill-chosen acquaintances on the refinement of an individual’s moral sentiments, a concern that would be advocated again by Adam Smith

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁵² Ibid., p. 171.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 261.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 220.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 220.

One of the reasons for the contemporary popularity of Shaftesbury's work can be traced to the concurrent interest in the cultivation of moderation, manners, gentility and politeness arising out of the urban culture of London during the early part of the eighteenth century. As mentioned in the introduction, through the medium of polite conversation it was hoped that man could shape himself and others into positive agents of social advancement and harmony. As a result, politeness became perceived by its proponents as offering the best possible method for man to engage in social interaction with his fellow man.

The ideological importance of this movement in secular culture, and the impetus for much of its popularity, can be traced to the *The Spectator* magazine. This periodical, published between March 1711 and December 1712, was created by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele and began its run within weeks after the publishing of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*.⁵⁶ In the wake of the revocation of the Licensing Act, which had required the acquisition of a government license to print, there was a huge explosion in the amount of printed matter appearing across Britain. With this proliferation of pamphlets and periodicals also came a realisation that this new liberty made the press an acceptable and effective means of manipulating opinion and controlling ideas. Addison and Steele, realising the power of this medium, attempted through *The Spectator* to override factious politics in favour of the cultivation of politeness and social cohesion.

The theme of *The Spectator* was heavily influenced by Shaftesbury, who insisted that men were capable of both altruistic and egoistic behaviour. While the latter were deemed by Addison and Steele to be destructive passions, the former were judged to be those which held together families, societies, and states. As *The Spectator* asserted, "good nature is generally born within us. Health, prosperity and kind treatment from the world are great cherishers of it where they can find it, but

⁵⁶ Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 2.

nothing is capable of forcing it up, where it does not grow of it self. It is one of the Blessings of a happy constitution which Education may improve but not produce".⁵⁷ Having a natural propensity toward goodness, it was left to the individual only to cultivate that innate characteristic toward its full fruition.

The means by which *The Spectator* attempted to facilitate this was by encouraging individuals to dislodge themselves from the narrow circle of associates in which they found themselves, and to engage themselves in the larger society. The aim of this social intercourse was to correct false notions of manners, morals and taste, while at the same time cultivating polite learning and a decorous society.⁵⁸ Those in this new circle came from all different walks of life, and thus they had nothing in common except conversation itself. Given the widely varying background of the participants, the topics of discussion were not to involve the divisive sectionalist issues of the day. Rather, they were to involve discussions of such topics as manners and taste. This was all an affirmative effort to cultivate a wide, as opposed to narrow, social experience by talking about matters in general. It was hoped that the result of this carefully orchestrated social interaction it was the tempering and ultimate modification of sectarian views and behaviour. By presenting readers with an alternative group of associates within the fictitious club in the pages of *The Spectator* itself, the periodical aimed to show, by example, how best to cultivate the sort of politeness which would most effectively serve the individual and society as a whole.

The goal of this type of social interaction was to transcend the divisive topics of politics and religion, yet still affect public behaviour. For it must be must be remembered that the cultivation of the skills needed to engage in convivial banter was not done merely for its own sake, but rather was aimed at facilitating positive social interaction. To be good citizens, it was necessary to learn good manners. It

⁵⁷ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, Vol. I - V (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) Number 165.

⁵⁸ See, I. Shawcross, "Addison as a Social Reformer", *Contemporary Review*, v. 153 (May 1938) p. 585. See also, *The Spectator*, number 4.

was also contended that by teaching people to become their real selves, a psychological change from sectarianism to congenial social unity could ultimately be cultivated through polite conversation. In so doing, man would not be twisting his nature to create this polite society, but would in reality begin to behave naturally. In other words, people had to be re-socialised by escaping the small 'cells' in which they had traditionally existed, and enter into a wider world of a true society, and where, in the process, they would ultimately become their real selves.

In contrast to the Hobbes, Addison and Steele presented an alternative vision of man: as someone who could acquire values, be resolute in their application, and thus have some sense of social affinity. By maintaining that man had a benevolent feeling for the species as a whole, it followed that man's actions were not governed by punishment, but by feelings of social responsibility. Man did not come begrudgingly into social relationship with his fellow men; rather, he willingly and enthusiastically engaged in conversation with his fellow man in order to expand his understanding of those around him, as well as of himself.

However, particularly among moral theorists, the debate as to the actual motivation behind social interaction and the true reason behind an individual's willingness to engage in 'polite' society raged on. One of the greatest detractors of the assumptions being by the proponents of 'polite' society was that of Bernard Mandeville. As infamous as he was famous, "Mandevil" (as Fielding and others chose to spell it) challenged the fundamental premises underlying polite society and rejected the Shaftesburian assumption of man's natural sociability.⁵⁹ Though approaching the topic by way of acerbic satire rather than a scholarly treatise on sociability, Mandeville still managed to create a controversy that was to play a seminal role in shaping the debate over the nature of both society and language within the Scottish Enlightenment.

⁵⁹ Irwin Primer (ed.), Mandeville Studies: New Explorations in the Art and Thought of Dr. Bernard Mandeville (1670 - 1733) (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975) p. vi.

While Mandeville's elaboration of his famous 'selfish system' spans over twenty-seven years, the philosophical controversy surrounding his views on virtue and sociability can be traced to the publication of *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), an adaptation of an earlier work, *The Grumbling Hive* (1705).⁶⁰ *The Fable of the Bees* presented a devastating example of moral scepticism. Through an analogy to the functioning of a beehive, Mandeville argued that all human behaviour can ultimately be traced back to pride, flattery and gullibility. In addition, Mandeville judged the need to turn private interests into public good as the central tenet of social interaction. Politeness is in reality an act of hypocrisy, and as Mandeville would have it, "Moral Virtues are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride".⁶¹

In order to refute the position of Shaftesbury,⁶² in *The Fable of the Bees* Mandeville attempted to do what Shaftesbury had failed to do, namely, trace the origin and growth of politeness. For if the origins of sociability were not genetic, it was necessary to present a historical explanation that would trace the origin and growth of politeness, and thus the motivation for it in the first place. To accomplish this goal, Mandeville was forced to adopt a methodology in which the philosopher becomes, at times, a historian in order search out the reasons for such behaviour. As a result, Mandeville engaged in the extensive use of conjectural history in an attempt to flesh-out the answer to this conundrum of man's past.

As we will see in the forthcoming chapters, the use of such conjectural history as a mode of analysis was eventually to have a profound affect on the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. While its major influence throughout the century was as a subversive document, *The Fable of the Bees* still presented paradoxes that were to

⁶⁰ The more general public controversy around the book can be traced to the date 1723, when Mandeville added his controversial *Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools* to his *Fable of the Bees*. Due to the great support the Charity Schools received from the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, the attack by Mandeville resulted in the disdain of the Establishment of the day.

⁶¹ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 1723 ed., (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1927) p. 51.

⁶² While Mandeville makes no overt reference to Shaftesbury in print until 1720 in *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness*, it seems unlikely that he had not yet encountered, directly or indirectly, the central tenets of Shaftesbury's ethical system by 1714.

be subject to serious theoretical exploration by these major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. As Irwin Primer notes, "The serious thinkers who grappled with his paradoxes - Adam Smith, among others - came away often enough with an indelible impression of the Mandevillian framework of ideas that would continue to influence their own thinking even after they had formally rejected the 'errors' of Mandeville".⁶³ Although Mandeville was not, by his own admission, a systematic writer who strove after coherence and consistency, it is clear that the impact of his *The Fable on the Bees* was immense in the area of social and moral theory.

To round out our discussion of those theorists who were to have an impact on the thinking of Hume, Smith, and Reid, it is only fitting to end the discussion with a theorist who came to have an immediate and lasting influence on these Scots: Francis Hutcheson. Professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow from 1730 until his death in 1746, his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) gave a critical impetus to the Scottish Enlightenment's philosophy of morality and society.⁶⁴ Credited with conveying the sentimentalist basis of ethics and empiricism to the forefront of the Scottish Enlightenment, his 'moral sense' theory of morality served as an important touchstone to Hume's, Smith's, and Reid's attempts to construct a cogent social and moral theory.

Hutcheson's theory repudiated the Hobbesian and Mandevillian egoistic model by contending that human nature was dictated by God given features that qualified man for a moral life. He argued that men have esteem and affection for others to a degree far beyond what this sort of calculated reasoning would necessitate, and as a result, for Hutcheson it was clear that man's actions are governed by natural feelings of sociability. Society was not based on a society comprised of a weak union of self-interested individuals, but rather upon inherent feelings of interpersonal connection divinely intertwined into their very being.

⁶³ Primer, pp. x - xi.

⁶⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue: in Two Treatises*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for J. Darby, 1726).

Maintaining the centrality of the natural sociability of man, Hutcheson presented a complex and organic characterisation of society in which man attempts to hone his innate sympathetic nature as manifest in his mutual and spontaneous concern for others. This was accomplished by the refinement of our innate 'moral sense'. This moral sense releases our natural faculty to judge and evaluate, a mechanism which must be understood and channelled in order for us to be sociable. As one becomes older and more experienced, this sense is marked by a gradual progression from concern for intimate relations to a more general concern for society. By asserting that ethical principles were ultimately based on a conception of moral judgement as a natural faculty rather than based on God's law, Hutcheson opened the way for classical conceptions of civic virtue.⁶⁵ As a result, Hutcheson's work presents a crucial humanistic theory in which ideas of sociability and sentimentalism are allowed to flourish. Moral reasoning and sociability were not however simply grounded in sentimental philosophy or a conception of 'moral sense', but were rather constructed on the assumption that there is a 'shared world of moral experience' in which moral standards could be cultivated through communication in the same manner as taste.

In addition, Hutcheson, by maintaining that feelings rather than pure reason were the basis of moral judgement, came to stress the importance of the shaping of our natural affections. Humans are portrayed by him as benevolent and social creatures who actively engage each other in the creation of a body of shared judgements and ideals. Hutcheson's ideas of sentimentalism and civic virtue came to have a profound impact on the discussion of morality and sociability in the second half of the century. The philosophy of Hutcheson also provided a humanist basis upon which cultural themes of sociability and sentiment would be developed.⁶⁶ Lastly, Hutcheson's emphasis on the significance of communication for the establishment of group norms he initiated an approach, followed up on by

⁶⁵ Susan Purviance, "Intersubjectivity and Sociable Relations in the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson", in John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher, Sociability and Society in Eighteenth Century Scotland (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1993) p. 24.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 24.

the likes of Hume, Smith and Reid, which located this sharing process in spoken language. For Hutcheson and those who followed him, the importance of everyday conversation in cementing social bonds and the refinement of moral norms.

3. Conversation and Community: The Role of Language in the Emerging Sociability Debate

Throughout the early modern debate regarding the nature of man's sociability, language was recognised as being an essential characteristic of man that played a significant role in the dispersion of social and moral ideals. For whatever the motivation behind man's interaction with his fellow man, the ability to communicate via language was a necessary precursor. It was clear that without meaningful verbal interaction, there could be no societal cohesion, regardless of whether that communication was ultimately motivated by selfish or altruistic intentions. It was crucial, therefore, to discover the motivation for this interpersonal verbal communication, an act which was such an integral part of the socialisation process. As a result, the motivation behind the use of language, the *intention* behind the verbal act, became of great concern. Likewise, language's potential for facilitating human interaction, its limitations, as well as the scope of its potential manipulation for good or ill, were all seen as central issues relating to the nature of language that must be resolved if any true understanding of man's sociable nature was to be gained.

The resulting theoretical discussion of language produced within this debate focused its attention predominantly on the impact of language on *discourse*. While acknowledging the importance of language as a defining feature of mankind, sociability theorists of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century did not tend to incorporate extensive epistemological analysis of language into their theories. For them, when it came to the influence of language in shaping man's character, language in action within the society itself was what mattered. As one might predict, the interpretation of how this 'language in action' manifested itself varied greatly from theorist to theorists.



Despite these differences, two general trends do appear to be discernable. On the one side, we have the Hobbesian and Machiavellian 'selfish' scenario's perspective on the origin and subsequent development of language. Hobbes' discussion of language focused on the essential role of language in the development of society. He maintained that, without language, there would be "neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, nor more than among lions, bears and wolves."⁶⁷ While acknowledging the fundamental importance of language in the acquisition of knowledge, the civil function of language was pre-eminent to Hobbes, as it was seen as the medium of exchange which allowed us to develop, share, and that knowledge and generally develop our abilities in such a manner as would otherwise not exist without it. The end to which this was directed was the creation of a form of social interaction that served to advance self-protection through mutual defence.

Mandeville also recognised the importance of language in gaining an understanding of the reason behind man's willingness to enter into society. As noted above, rejecting the idea that man was innately drawn toward others in some inherently benevolent way, Mandeville found it necessary to determine why social behaviour would arise in the first place. Mandeville found his answer in the needs of man. Keeping in line with this premise, he maintained that man's interpersonal communication arose from his desires and the ability to address those desires, rather than through any form of inherent love or connection with his fellow man. Therefore, critical in Mandeville's view was that these needs of man could only be satisfied through the medium of language.

In order to justify this position, Mandeville once again had to proffer a conjectural history of mankind's acquisition of language. In order to facilitate his need-based theory of language, Mandeville presented a bold refutation of the

⁶⁷ Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill, K.R. Minogue (intro.), (New York: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1974) Ch. IV, p. 12.

orthodox interpretation of the origin of language by presenting the idea of language development through a slow evolutionary process.⁶⁸ In *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville openly rejected the theological interpretation of the origins of language. In cutting these ties from the Adamic tradition, he allowed for a secular explanation more in keeping with the Enlightenment's effort to find a theory that would lend itself to empirical analysis. The hypothesis that he presented as the alternative to the biblical explanation, though brief, was to serve as the fundamental starting point for almost all of the later eighteenth-century discussions of the origin of language.

His theory of the origin of language revolved around a post-diluvian humanity whose origin could be traced back not to Adam and Eve, but rather to a primordial couple, the 'wild couple', who, according to Mandeville, was isolated from earliest infancy from human society.⁶⁹ Deprived of every help and example, Mandeville presented a scenario in which this couple create, in isolation, the arts and institutions of civil life by drawing solely on their human potentialities.⁷⁰ Mandeville maintained that the starting point of the formation of language was to be found in an innate connection that allowed each to understand the other.⁷¹ "I am persuaded," asserted Mandeville, "that Nature has made all Animals of the same kind, in their mutual Commerce, intelligible to one another, as far as is requisite for the Preservation of themselves and their species: And as to my wild couple ... I believe there would be a very good Understanding, before many Sounds past between them."⁷²

Mandeville maintained that an example of this rudimentary mutual understanding was to be found in early man's ability, like other animals, to make several distinct sounds to express different passions such as anger or great danger.

⁶⁸ Juliard p. 20.

⁶⁹ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, The Fourth Dialog, p. 190.

⁷⁰ Lia Formigari, "Language and Experience in 17th Century British Philosophy", *Language Science Series*, v. 48, p. 155.

⁷¹ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, The Sixth Dialogue, pp. 284 - 286.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

Above and beyond these noises, however, man also had the ability to express certain passions by gesture, such as grief, joy, wonder, and fear, which could not be expressed by animals yet were recognised by “the generality of human Creatures”.⁷³ These passions were expressed by “weeping, laughing, frowning, sighing, exclaiming”, which would invoke, by “the Language of the Eyes,” compassion in man unique to his species.⁷⁴ “[A]nd in that Language,” quipped Mandeville, “our wild Couple would at their first meeting intelligibly say more to one another without guile, than any civilis’d Pair would dare to name without blushing.”⁷⁵

Mandeville further contended that while spoken language was a characteristic of our species, man was not born with it, and that it would take dozens of generations before the first signs of anything which could be termed language would develop.⁷⁶ It was Mandeville’s contention that a limited number of signs and gestures made between two uncivilised individuals comprised the first language. These signs and gestures eventually were able to stimulate in the mind of the observer ideas corresponding to objects immediately at hand. After several years this pair began to replace signs with sounds. The longer they lived together, the more sounds they adopted. Each successive generation accelerated this process.⁷⁷ Because Mandeville imagines man’s history to be extremely long, he was able to posit that the qualities which we now associate with man were absent in his early years. Reasoning, speaking, and associating with others may be potential in early man, but they require long periods before experience and education brought them to fruition. It was only as men learn, by experience over many years, how to think and speak that they learned to live together. Mandeville also maintained that our knowledge came only through observations received by the

⁷³ Ibid., p. 286.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 287.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 287.

⁷⁶ Ibid., The Fourth Dialogue, p. 190; The Sixth Dialogue, p. 286.

⁷⁷ Ibid., The Sixth Dialogue, p. 288.

senses over the course of time. "Men," Mandeville concluded, are able to gain knowledge only through "unwearied observation, judicious experience, and arguing from facts *a posteriori*."⁷⁸

Mandeville opined that before man came into extended contact with other men he had neither the ability nor the inclination to reflect upon himself or his state, be it good or bad.⁷⁹ As a result of this fact, Mandeville asserted that it would have been impossible to develop communication, without extended contact with, and observation of, others.⁸⁰ His discussion of language in the *Fourth Dialogue* merged directly into his discussion of society and the need for humans to be brought up together in order to *learn* "Speech and Sociableness".⁸¹ If all were "[S]trangers to one another", the species could not have gained this ability.⁸² To Mandeville, the formation of speech and living in society went hand-in-hand.

It is important to note, however, that Mandeville did not claim that man developed language, "in order that their Thoughts may be known, and their Sentiments laid open and seen by others."⁸³ Language is purely a tool that an individual uses to his own benefit, rather than a medium by which to share his sentiments. "I am of the Opinion," Mandeville asserted, "that the first Design of Speech was to persuade others, either to give Credit to what the speaking Person would have them believe; or else to act or suffer such Things, as he would compel them to act or suffer, if they were in his Power".⁸⁴ From earliest childhood, language is used solely to express one's wants and one's will. Man was motivated to speak simply because he learned that a natural gesture combined with speech made his effort to persuade doubly effective. Driven by a desire to triumph over, as

⁷⁸ Ibid., The Fourth Dialogue, p. 190.

⁷⁹ Ibid., The Sixth Dialogue, p. 285.

⁸⁰ Ibid., The Fourth Dialogue, p. 191.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁸² Ibid., p. 191.

⁸³ Ibid., The Sixth Dialogue, p. 289.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 290.

well as persuade others, Mandeville argued that man strove to present himself as not driven by his passions, but by reason in order to win the favour of his fellow man.

The Mandevillian perspective on language, therefore, did not focus its attention on the limitations or influence of language on shaping man's mental processes as was the case in the rationalist/empiricist debate on language. Rather, language was characterised a necessary tool made available to man for gaining, from social interaction, what he desires. It was language in action, not the limitations of the human mind reflected in language, which was his central concern.

In contrast to Mandeville and his selfish system, those theorists that assuming a degree of natural sociability in man's character present a very different conception of language. The use of language was portrayed by these theorists as both the means by which man's inherent predisposition toward sociability was made a reality, and the medium through which man could hope to perfect this most essential of characteristics. Language was depicted as a cornerstone of mankind, but only in as much as it is the conduit through which sociability is realised. As a result, these theorists concerned themselves with the following questions: How did the origin and development of language help to justify the contention that man was innately as sociable creature? How could language be refined and perfected in order to maximise the sociable nature of man? In what manner might veracity in language use be cultivated in order to discourage any corruption of, or mistrust in, the medium itself? These were the questions that concerned these advocates of man's sociable nature in relation to language and language use, and they determined that only through an understanding of language's unique advantages, as well as its limitations, could such questions be given adequate answers.

The use of references to language and language use in confirming man's natural sociability is perhaps first and best demonstrated by Pufendorf himself. In Book I of *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* published in

1673, Pufendorf devoted chapter ten, On the Duty of Men in the Use of Language, to the discussion of the impact of language on man's sociability. Pufendorf opened this chapter by stating: "Everyone knows how useful, how simply necessary, an instrument of human society language [*sermo*] is. Indeed, it has often been argued, on the basis of this faculty alone, that man is intended by nature to live a social life. The legitimate and profitable use of language for human society is based upon this duty prescribed by natural law: no man should deceive another by language or by other signs which have been established to express the sense of his mind [*sensa animi*]."⁸⁵ Pufendorf also stressed that language use created a double obligation on the part of the participants. The first obligation was created through the tacit agreement to use the same words for the same objects. The second obligation in the use of language was, "that in speaking to someone one should disclose the sense of one's mind to him in such a way that he may clearly know it".⁸⁶ This is necessary so that the listener may derive some benefit from knowing the sense of the other person's mind. The other person, however, must have some sort of perfect or imperfect right to hear it. If the person does not have such a right, then the speaker does not have a binding obligation to speak truthfully. As Pufendorf noted:

It is clear from this that we are not always telling a lie when we say, and say deliberately, what does not exactly correspond either with the facts or with our thoughts. Hence what we might call 'logical truth', which consists in the congruence of words with things, does not altogether coincide with 'moral truth'. A lie, on the other hand, is when our language purposely makes out the sense of our mind to be other than it really is, provided that the person to whom we are talking has the right to know it and we have the obligation of ensuring that he does know it.⁸⁷

Lastly, Pufendorf made provisions for the occasional white lie, but only in cases that ultimately furthered inter-personal relationships and connection. Thus, such prevarications were permissible in order to "protect the innocent, placate the angry,

⁸⁵ Samuel Pufendorf, *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, James Tully (ed.), Michael Silverthorne (trans.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 78.

comfort the mourning, give courage to the fearful”⁸⁸ Language as a means of creating unity through social cohesion and bonding, therefore, was the pre-eminent consideration in Pufendorf’s discussion of language, even if that unity is precipitated by acts which violate general social usage.

Similarly, in the case of Shaftesbury, Addison and Steele, the emphasis was placed on the power of language to shape man and refine his interpersonal connections. The aim of language was therefore to convey beliefs and habits, to make people feel at ease with each other, and perhaps most importantly, as a tool to mould virtuous social interaction. It was clear to them that by controlling language, the whole of mankind could be changed. Through conversation in of ‘polite society’, they hoped that mankind could make itself sociable via the correct use of language. As a result the focus of the sociable school of theorists’ understanding of language’s importance in moulding man’s virtuous character was on conversation and discourse.

Lastly, everyday conversation had an important role in forming ethical values and cementing social bonds within the theory of Hutcheson. His sentimentalism raised the questions as to whether or not individuals had the ability to distinguish between subjective and objective validity. Because the moral sense was not perfect, yet its existence still implied a communal pool of ethical sensitivity shared by all individuals, there must be some neutral and universal standard of moral taste. While our internal judgement was necessarily subjective, its concurrence with others’ judgement results in the objective validation of those judgements. This concurrence, in turn, comes to define the nature of acceptable moral conduct. The implicit assumption was that, since men come to these conclusions through conversation with their fellow men, that the medium of language lends an objective proof to the accuracy of our moral sense, thus removing the subjectivity question. Hutcheson further implied that society was held together through the moral dispositions of its members, with language serving as a tool by which this can be

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

verified and refined. As a result, Hutcheson emphasised the significance of interpersonal communication in the establishment of group norms, and this contributed to a distinct tendency in the works of Scottish thinkers to locate this sharing process in spoken language.⁸⁹

Hutcheson did not, however, isolate and expand on these assumptions about how one would come to verify the validity of the moral sense through extensive references to language and language use. There are two possible explanations for this fact. The first being that, although implicit in his theory, Hutcheson may not have elaborated on the significance of the use of language as the medium for this exchange because he appeared to assume that the use of language would almost necessarily lead toward this confirmation. The second and perhaps more tenable explanation for the lack of such an elaboration is that Hutcheson's hypothesis was ultimately based on an innate moral sense, an innate faculty that functions without social refinement. Language, therefore, could only operate within the confines of, and only relative to, the norm provided by the moral sense. Without this innate motivation, the rest of his theory would fail. Thus, while language may be the medium essential for the verification of this moral sense, and even a tool for its refinement within set perimeters, language was, ultimately, neither necessary for its existence nor for its functioning. Man had an innate capacity for experiencing moral pleasure and displeasure, and language must ultimately conform itself to that reality.

4. The Merging of the Epistemological and the Social Elements of Language within the Scots' Efforts to Construct a 'Science of Man'

Having given a brief account of early modern speculation regarding the influence of language on the shaping of man's character, we must now turn to the theories of Hume, Smith and Reid and assess the rationale and conclusions formulated by them relating to language and language use. It will be argued that in their attempt to

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁸⁹ Dwyer, p. 1.

create an all encompassing 'Science of Man' these theorists would draw inspiration from the contemporary debate outlined above both in relation to the epistemological implications of language as well as importance of language in sociable discourse. As we will see in the following chapters, by drawing together the hitherto disparate strands of language in relation to thought, and language in relation to society, these discussions of language use shed light on the way in which they characterised the conceptions of morality, virtue, and sociability.

To gain this full picture of man's true nature, it was necessary to reckon the cognitive conclusions relating to language with the then current discussion as to the true motivation and function of social discourse. Due to these Scottish theorists' apparent conclusion that it was useful to both recognise the importance of understanding language in order to determine the character of personal development, coupled with their belief that conversation and discourse played an important role in defining and shaping man's moral character, they utilised references to language and language use to illustrate and substantiate their claims.

As a result, the following questions were addressed: Did man reveal his social and moral character through language, or was that character dictated by language itself? Was his ethical nature pre-destined, or could it be shaped by interaction and conversation with his fellow man? Was the inherent limitation of language, particularly its ambiguity in regards to moral concepts, so restricting that it did not allow for us to ever fully express our sentiments, and thus connect fully with our fellow man? Was the honest usage of language necessary for inter-personal communication to take place at all? How did the origin and development of language shed light on the true nature of man's sociability? Was language itself natural or artificial? What were the implications of the conclusions necessarily drawn regarding the natural/artificial question as it relates to morality and sociability? By taking up these sorts of questions regarding the relationship

between cognitive language assumptions and man's use of language within a social context, it was hoped that they could help bolster their claims regarding how man comes to an understanding of his societal and moral obligations

This being the case, it will be argued that, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the 'Science of Man' put forward by these Scots, it is valuable for historians to take their characterisation of language and language use into account. What follows is a discussion of the implications of such an approach to the moral and social theories of Hume, Smith, and Reid. In each case, this thesis attempts to analyse the way these individuals grapple with the issue of language, how they come to connect the internal with the social element of language and language use, and, ultimately, how their conclusions on these matters impacted their efforts to present a coherent social and moral theory.

CHAPTER II

David Hume and the Importance of Linguistic Moral Convention

In the proceeding chapter we examined various Early Modern scholars' exploration of the epistemological, sociological, and moral implications associated with man's ability to utilise language in his social interactions. We will now turn our attention to the relationship between morality, sociability and language within the writings of David Hume. It is certainly clear that Hume was very much in tune with the general intellectual trends of the period, and there is no doubt that references to epistemology, sociability, morality and language consistently arise throughout his works. What follows is an attempt to link together and analyse Hume's references specifically to language, and relate their significance to Hume's more general theory of morality and sociability. Approaching Hume in this manner, it will be argued that while not discussing language in isolation, language does play an important role in Hume's conception of the means by which men come to understand and function within their social and moral universe.

Given the general tenor of philosophical discussion concerned with language presented by his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, the premise that Hume concerned himself with language as a means by which to illustrate and substantiate his conclusions regarding man's social and moral character may seem from the very start questionable. For example, having examined at length the general tenor of analysis of language during the Early Modern Period in the previous chapter, one is struck by the conspicuous lack of discussion of natural versus artificial language as well as any extended analysis the origin of language in any of Hume's works, a process so common in nearly all discussions of language during the Enlightenment. It would seem that this threshold issue must first be addressed if any meaningful analysis of Hume's conception of language in relation to his moral and social theory can be achieved.

A close reading of Hume does reveal that he did refer in passing to natural signs, and how they move others to action, much in line with Mandeville's assumptions regarding this process.¹ He stated, "[R]educe a person to solitude, and he loses all enjoyment, except either of the sensual or speculative kind; and that because the movements of his heart are not forwarded by correspondent movements in his fellow-creatures. The signs of sorrow and mourning, though arbitrary, affect us with melancholy; but the natural symptoms, tears and cries and groans, never fail to infuse compassion and uneasiness".² Hume also acknowledged that such natural expressions are the basis for rudimentary inter-personal communication. He did not, however, consider it necessary to elaborate on these fleeting references. Nor did he consider it necessary to incorporate into his works any discussion of a 'savage couple' *à la* Mandeville.

Yet if Hume was indeed so concerned about the influence of language on man's social and moral character, why did he not provide an elaborate discussion on the origin of language? For, as we witnessed in the previous chapter, and will see again particularly in the theories of Condillac, Rousseau, Smith and Reid, most individuals who concerned themselves with the truths about human nature revealed by language during this period argued that the origin and early development of inter-personal communication were extremely important. For the discovery of the motivation behind nascent language use by man was deemed by most Enlightenment thinkers as particularly revealing in their quest to unlock mankind's most elementary characteristics.

It does not seem, however, that the lack of such a discussion on the part of Hume negates the argument that language played an important supporting role in his theory. In fact, it would be more logical to argue that his lack of an extended or isolated discussion of the origin of language reveals much more about Hume's

¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 109.

² Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 109 - 110.

assumptions about language than would its inclusion. The absence of any sort of discussion of a 'savage couple' merely clarifies exactly how Hume conceived of language and man's social character. The most probable reason behind the lack of such a discussion can be traced to Hume's general dismissal of the significance of theorising about a state of nature in the first place.

Hume argued that there is little or no use in theorising about 'pre-social' man in any context, linguistic or otherwise. Be it characterised as a golden age of milk and honey as Rousseau would come to maintain, or of "perpetual war of all against all" as Hobbes had argued, it was of little matter to Hume. He asserted that "[W]hether such a condition of human nature could ever exist, or if it did, could continue so long as to merit appellation of a *state*, may justly be doubted. Men are necessarily born in a family-society, at least; and are trained up by their parents to some rule of conduct and behaviour".³ Given this assumption that man is always born into and socialised in a rudimentary form via the family, if nothing more, the lack of a discussion of some 'savage couple' is at least understandable. Hume did not maintain, as did Mandeville, that we had to learn to live together, at least at this most rudimentary level, for we were in fact by default necessarily born into a pre-existing social system.

Hume's characterisation of language, as well as morality, hinged upon the assumption that these all were pre-existing institutions that are part and parcel of the 'common life' he sought to explore. It was his goal to explain how these human institutions functioned rather than came into being. In this sense, we will see that Hume's discussion of language was merely in keeping with his general goal to locate the locus of human nature in society as it exists, not in the hyperbole of a theoretical past that never existed. Hume simply took for granted the existence of language as the mechanism for regulating social intercourse. Given his general dismissal of the usefulness of pre-social conjectures, the lack of a discussion on the origin of language, so common during the period, does not negate Hume's potential

³ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 88.

contribution to the dialogue taking place at this time regarding the nature and influence of language on man's social and moral character. It is merely that Hume enters into the contemporary discourse regarding the nature and influence of language at a later stage than many of his contemporaries.

In order to support this contention, we will first explore the distinct methodology employed by Hume in his efforts to create a 'Science of Man', an effort on the part of Hume to construct a means of systematic empirical analysis in order to gain insight into man's social and moral character. By the utilisation and, perhaps most critically, the adaptation of the pioneering efforts being made in the natural sciences, Hume championed a new methodology for the investigation of man's social and moral character. When the weight of Hume's methodological assumptions are brought to bear upon his exploration of man's conceptions of virtue and vice, the role of language within his theory becomes more and more evident.

Through the methodology forged by Hume, the idea of custom, bias, and convention all became foundational principles upon which were laid Hume's conclusions as to the true essence of man's social and ethical nature. We will explore the implications of these new guiding principles, and their impact on Hume's ultimate rejection of the classical lines of debate being proffered by both the rationalists and the sentimentalists. We will further explore the role language and language use played in Hume's characterisation of the virtue of justice, a social convention which unlocks the key for understanding all of man's conceptions of virtue and vice.

It will be argued that the relevance of language in analysing Hume's theory of man's social and moral character relates to the central role that conventions play in his characterisation of how we come to an understanding of virtue and vice. The fact that language is the convention upon which all other societal conventions depend allows Hume to use language not merely as a convenient tool for making

analogies, which he certainly does, but more importantly, as actual empirical evidence of man's true character by highlighting and analyzing the implications of language's role in establishing and enforcing communal understandings of social mores in everyday life.

More specifically, it will be contended that the importance of an understanding of Hume's characterisation of language within Hume's theory also relates directly to Hume's contention "that *reason* and *sentiment* concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions."⁴ For at the root of Hume's theory of morality is the idea that moral decision-making requires an ongoing interaction between reason and feeling, the one motivating, the other qualifying and directing. The opposition between feeling and reason is replicated in the process of social intercourse, where self-interest and general communal standards meet. Hume maintained that individuals could not share one another's moral sentiments were it not for general language, which affords a common set of terms to describe both moral actions and approbation. Yet those communally recognisable terms cannot supplant private interests; they can only serve as a medium for bringing them into the arena of common discourse, where a continual process of adjustment between the private and the public takes place. What is important to Hume is the process itself, the continuing dialogue between the self and others that goes into shaping their moral character, a process made possible by the unconscious ties of community embodied in language itself.⁵

Hume's Effort to Establish a 'Science of Man'

In order to come to an understanding of the nexus between language, sociability, and morality within Hume's works, it is necessary first to explore the methodology employed by Hume. For it is the methodological assumptions that Hume adopted

⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, P. 75.

⁵ *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher (eds.), "Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* as Social Discourse", by Jeffrey R. Smitten (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1993) p. 54.

in his attempt to create a 'science of man' that ultimately shaped his characterisation of the role of language within his philosophical discourse on morality and sociability.

Like many of his contemporaries, Hume is well known for having looked for inspiration in his work to the burgeoning exploration being advanced in the natural sciences. It is important to note, however, that his characterisation of what exactly this scientific investigation entailed was a variation on the general Enlightenment theme. In Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume advanced the notion that "all the sciences have a relation greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it still return back by one passage or another. Even *Mathematics*, *Natural Philosophy* [i.e. natural science], and *Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependent on the science of MAN; since truth lies under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties."⁶ Contrary to Locke, then, for whom philosophy was understood as the under-labourer of natural science, Hume maintained that the science of humanity is in fact logically prior to any other science. Hume never lost sight of the fact that nature itself is only grasped through human life and experience. Unlike Descartes, Malebranche, and Berkeley, Hume wished to root philosophy in human experience and to do so in a way that both acknowledged the limits of reason and eschewed metaphysical powers. He aimed to produce a secular philosophy in the tradition of Newton, Shaftsbury, Mandeville, and Hutcheson, attempting to bring the systematic examination of man's nature to the next level.

Given his contention that the pursuit of scientific knowledge is necessarily rooted in man's life and experience, it seemed logical enough that the advances witnessed in the natural sciences could be utilized as well in understanding human nature itself. Hume characterised his philosophy as an attempt to develop a 'science of human nature', which means a systematic explanation of the human mind, including moral sentiments. Hume maintained that the workings of the inner

⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Ernest C. Mossner (ed.), (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1985)

mind and human behaviour are natural elements, and therefore a science ideally should be able to explain both of them using methods like those it uses to explain other events in nature. He hoped to develop a science of human nature by examining the inner world of perception, desire, emotion, reasoning and inference that he hoped would provide laws of psychology that are as well confirmed as laws of physics.

The result of this approach would be a new 'science of man' based on the evidence that could be gained through the examination of publicly observable human behaviour. Hume in fact chose a title that included 'principles of morals' because he was looking for general principles of human nature, as discovered in common life and practice. In his exploration of moral philosophy, Hume therefore began with moral phenomena, such as the ways in which we approve and disapprove of various forms of human conduct. After closely analysing both his own mental faculties and observing the behaviour of other people, he sought to isolate the explanatory principles and causes that would elevate his observations to the status of a science.

The application of the scientific method to his philosophical enquiry would seem to have some other necessary consequences. In order for such philosophical enquiry to avoid being tainted by theology, politics, or some other prejudice, it would seem to require the philosopher to do all he can to separate himself from such restraints and influences. The philosopher would seem to necessarily have to adopt an Archimedean point outside the domain of common life as a whole, for the prejudices of common life are presumed by this perspective to be guilty unless they can be seen to comply with the purity of autonomous philosophical reasoning. It follows that in order to achieve this perspective must consciously reject the domain of received order of habit, custom and tradition and become a spectator to them.

However, Hume disagree that this was either a necessary or advantageous goal. On the contrary, he deemed such efforts both futile and undesirable. It is important to remember that Hume's effort to adopt the scientific method did not mean that he failed to see the vital need of *adapting* that method as well. Therefore, Hume parted ways with the Enlightenment, in relation to at least this methodological assumption regarding the nature of sound scientific investigation. For if Hume taught that religion appears as 'sick men dreams' he also taught that men 'from reasoning purely philosophical' have run into "as great extravagancies of conduct as any Monk or Dervise that ever was in the World – capable of generating absurdities the equal of any in religion". In Part IV of Book I of the *Treatise*, he presents his argument against such an effort to stand outside of the society one is attempting to understand. It takes the form of three stage philosophical Drama where philosophical reflection emerges dialectically out of the prejudices of common life, imagines itself the spectator and absolute arbiter of these prejudices, then collapses into self alienation and incoherence; and through further reflection returns back to a prejudice of common life from which it originated.⁷

Hume knows himself to be inexorably a participant in custom, and equally that reason will not allow him to affirm this participation. Philosophical reflection attains what Hume calls true philosophy only when one critically affirms the order of prejudice as having original authority. Attempts to live and analyse human nature in a vacuum must in Hume's opinion be abandoned. He pointed out that 'false philosophical consciousness' fails to properly take into account the constitutive role that prejudice and custom play in human thought. Though necessarily a participant in common life, the false philosopher in reality is totally alienated from its authority by virtue of the unreformed autonomy of principle. Hume opined that philosophical reflection which attempts to remove itself completely from the entire domain of prejudice is empty. Philosophy must therefore abandon the autonomous principle, and rather affirm the original authority of the domain of prejudice to command judgment.

⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 231 – 238.

Hume thus maintained we must place restraints upon the concept of the autonomy of reflection and instead adopt what one might term the 'autonomy of custom' and affirm the authority of custom and prejudice to command judgment. The false philosopher judged himself to be the spectator and sovereign arbiter of whatever domain of custom he is reflecting upon. The true philosopher, by contrast recognised that he is a critical participant in whatever domain of custom he is examining. Whereas false philosophy had presumed custom to be false unless certified by autonomous reflection, Hume argued that custom is presumed true unless shown to be otherwise and where showing it to be otherwise, presupposes the validity of custom as a whole.

Critically for our purposes is the fact that Hume's new principle, the autonomy of custom points out a hitherto undiscovered mode of knowledge, namely, knowledge, not through propositional reflection, but through primordial participation. As we shall see in the following section, custom, and not autonomous reason, is judged by Hume to have a better title to rule, and custom is always internal to a social order with requires deference to others. Given these assumptions, Hume's methodology would have a profound impact on how he would weigh in on the moral and sociological debate that characterised the period as well as his characterisation of language's relation to man's sociability and morality.

2. Hume's Attempt to Strike a New Course in the Rationalist vs. Sentimentalist Debate

Having outlined Hume's innovative methodology, it remains to be seen how this methodology impacted his efforts to find the true driving force behind human morality. Re-enforcing his methodological assumptions in the area of morality, he 'promises to draw no conclusions but where...authorized by experience' and says he will speak 'with contempt of hypothesis' unless they can be confirmed by

experience. As noted in the previous chapter, the Rationalists maintained that moral judgment is based on a rational apprehension of eternal standards of right and wrong. The sentimentalists, on the other hand, held that judgment is founded on an internal sense or set of sentiments distinct from reason. Hume acknowledged this contemporary debate regarding whether morals are derived from reason or from sentiments. Noting the fact that from ancient times, no truly adequate answer had been presented, and that contemporary inquirers were no nearer to finding a proper answer, he went on to challenge the two sides and concludes that both are “susceptible of specious arguments”.⁸

As to the Rationalists’ claims, Hume asserted that reason is excluded from moral judgments and that, ultimately, ideas of virtue and vice revolve around the sense of pleasure or pain we experience, either directly through the passions, or indirectly through sympathy with others. Like his predecessor Locke, Hume maintained that no idea and no awareness of matters of fact are discoverable by pure reason. Locke referred to the mind’s contents as *ideas*; Hume’s parallel term is *perception*, a category under which he distinguishes *impressions* and *ideas*. Impressions are the items that come directly before the mind, such as colours, sounds, shapes, and feelings. Like many philosophers of his time, Hume believed that objects, events, other people, and the like are known to us only by perceptions. All conceptions and beliefs derive from these perceptions. To have a solid basis, each idea must have come originally from one or more impressions and must adequately represent the original source or sources.

For Hume, the basis of exploration of man’s sentiments rested in the passions, the ‘spring and motives’ that cause man to respond to stimulus in a certain way. These passions were portrayed as the root of individual motivation and were divided by Hume between direct or indirect and, as a separate matter, calm or violent. The direct passions, such as the feelings of joy, grief and fear, found their origin either in natural instinct or in the desire to do good, which were associated

⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 24.

by Hume with pleasure, or in the avoidance of evil, which was associated with pain. The origin of the indirect passions, such as humility, pride and love, could be traced to the combination of primitive motives with other factors that will be discussed below. The second, and separate, distinction between violence and calmness related to whether one acts instinctively and against one's own interest, and thus exhibiting a violent passion, or whether one is influenced by the greatest possible good to come from one's actions, thus exhibiting a calm passion.

Hume maintained that reason did not factor into the regulation of these passions. Because Hume conceived of reason only as being concerned with the discovery of truth or falsehood, he concluded that it can never be the motive for any action of the will. Accordingly, Hume argued that, "[R]eason is and ought to be the slave to the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them".⁹ Hume is particularly concerned to show that human rational capacities are more limited than some of his predecessors had maintained. They had maintained that reason is capable of grasping fundamental truths about the natural, mental, and moral worlds in a manner analogous to the way in which reason grasps mathematical truths. Hume categorically denied that reason has the capacity to deliver such knowledge and ultimate truths in areas as had been supposed by the Rationalist.

Hume also contended that reason does not play a controlling role in the formation of moral judgment. Hume stated, "[S]ince morals ... have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be deriv'd from reason," and thus, "the rules of morality are not the conclusions of our reason".¹⁰ Hume's central contention that moral beliefs and judgments were tied to the sentiments was based on his belief that they are, unlike reason, closely tied with action. It was

⁹ Hume, Treatise, p. 462.

¹⁰ Hume, Treatise, p. 509.

Hume's conclusion that we are moved to act, not by reason, but by our passions.¹¹ Hume insisted the most that reason can do was tell the individual what they 'ought' to do.

Unlike the rationalist who disapproved of behaviour driven by the passions, and viewed the passions as irrational and sometimes overpowering influences needing the disciplined control of reason, Hume thought that passions need not be confused, misleading, or censurable. In correlation with his methodological assumptions, Hume maintained that the passions are on the contrary vital and worthy dimensions of human nature. As noted in the methodological discussion earlier in this chapter, Hume held that such advice will only distract persons from proper moral behaviour and make them miserable. He contended that we should accept our nature rather than fight it. Reason cannot move us to action and cannot liberate us from the passions; reason can only be the faithful servant to the passions. Because Hume elevated the importance of the passions and lowered expectations of reason, he is sometimes regarded as an irrationalist who reduces human action to natural instincts. However, this seems to be a mischaracterization, rather Hume wanted to show that reason simply has sharp limits in philosophy and ordinary life.

In the opening paragraphs of Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume reiterated that reason is excluded from moral judgments and that, ultimately, ideas of virtue and vice revolve around the sense of pleasure or pain we experience, either directly through the passions, or indirectly through sympathy with others. While reason was excluded from moral evaluation, sympathy was characterised by Hume as playing a crucial role in the formation of morality judgment. Hume saw both moral sentiments and social virtues as arising out of our natural feelings of sympathy. By finding that moral judgment is the basis for feeling, Hume asserted that the 'peculiar sentiment of morals' was common to all men and therefore a general agreement existed in regards to the virtue/vice dichotomy.

¹¹ Paul Crittenden, *Learning to Be Moral: Philosophical Thoughts about Moral Development* (London: Humanities Press International, 1990) p. 210.

Though Hume never defined sympathy, he did discuss its nature and origin. In Book II of the *Treatise* sympathy is described as the process by which an 'idea' is converted into an 'impression'. Experience proves that the 'idea' in our minds of another person's passions is 'converted into the very impression' that those passions represent. By this means we can feel what another person feels. Similarly, our ability to form an idea of another's 'unease' is through the sympathetic mechanism converted into our partaking in that unease as well.

Hume maintained that sympathy, at its most fundamental level, is a natural and instinctive concern for others. It can be seen as the means by which we bridge the gap between our own passions and those of another. Through sympathy, the feelings of the individual gave rise to those same feelings in someone else. This was because, "the minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations".¹² The communication, both verbal and non-verbal, from one individual to another, was characterised as a manifestation of their inner intent, something that only they themselves could have direct access. It was from these external effects that the observer inferred the character of the passion itself.¹³ Characterised as a universal phenomenon by Hume, sympathy: a) was interpersonal, b) accommodated the sharing of 'fellow feeling' (by this he meant the sharing of emotions and concern for the welfare of others in such a manner that we can no longer be indifferent to them), and c) dictated that at some level we must be able to put ourselves in another's place and truly understand their feelings given the circumstances.

Presented as the causal mechanism by which the communication of the passions take place, sympathy was described by Hume as being the foundation from which opinions, beliefs, and attitudes were disseminated within a society. As a result, a central doctrine of Hume's philosophy was that the possession of sympathetic

¹² Hume, *Treatise*, p. 626.

¹³ Phillip Mercer, *Sympathy and Ethics: A Study of the Relationship Between Sympathy and Morality with Special Reference to Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) p. 24

reflex was a necessary precursor to moral judgement. Hume asserted, “nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself”.¹⁴

It is worth briefly noting that this interpretation of the exchange of the natural signs parallels, to a remarkable degree, the ideas behind the description of natural language that are highlighted by Mandeville in the previous chapter. While we will see that their conclusions regarding the driving force behind human social interaction were dramatically different, nevertheless, Hume’s characterisation of sympathy rested the same premises that were an accepted fact in regard to the character of ‘natural language’. As Mandeville had argued, human beings were generally regarded by Hume as having an innate desire to communicate their sentiments to each other, and by nature were given the means to make this a reality. Because of their use of voice or gesture, individuals are attributed with the ability to communicate the most fundamental and innate of their sentiments. Further, like Mandeville, in Hume’s theory there is an implicit assumption that the communication of these sentiments from one to another must be via external signs of these sentiments. In line with this necessity, Hume stated that, “[N]o passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy”.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 627.

¹⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 627.

However, having outlined the existence of the desire for, and mechanism of, the communication of sentiments between individuals, Hume was quick to acknowledge the limitations of the passions and sympathy in serving as the sole basis of a functioning of a workable moral system. Hume maintained in the *Enquiry* that while we cannot hope to simply rely upon reason to guide our moral judgments, it was equally specious to argue that all moral determinations are derived from the sentiments. He acknowledged that sentiments dictate the way we perceive in the first instance our impressions of virtue and vice. He also admitted that reason was incapable of dictating in advance how such reaction will occur. Critically, though, Hume maintained that simply being moved personally in one way or another does not result in a moral decision. He contended that the “end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget corresponding habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other”.¹⁶ He went on to say, “[t]hey [sentiments] discover truths; but where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct or behaviour”.¹⁷ Hume appeared to argue that without a structure placed upon these emotions affecting our perceptions and social interaction, there does not exist a moral system but rather simply men acting instinctively and individually.

Whatever the basis for concluding that the sentiments are the primary motivating factors behind morals, ultimately, “ ‘tis absurd to imagine, that in every particular instance, these sentiments are produc’d by an *original* quality and *primary* constitution. For as the number of our duties is, in a manner, infinite, ‘tis impossible that our original instincts should extend to each of them, and form our very first infancy impress on the human mind all that multitude of precepts, which are constrain’d in the compleatest system of ethics”.¹⁸ Hume went on to say that,

¹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 75.

¹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 75.

¹⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 525.

“[‘T]is necessary, therefore, to abridge these primary impulses, and find some more general principles, upon which all our notions of morals are founded”.¹⁹

It seems implicit in this assertion by Hume that it is necessary to distinguish between the individual’s moral feeling and his sympathy. A moral feeling is not a type of sympathy or sympathetic feeling; these necessarily diverge at a point where the element of objectivity, which is essential for moral judgement, is introduced.²⁰ Thus, Hume was forced to find a method of tying his conception of morals to sympathetic responses, while at the same time freeing it from the subjectivity assumed by sympathy.

It is at this point that Hume seemed to realise the necessity of qualifying the role of sympathy in the formation of societal conceptions of virtue and vice, moving away from a discussion of the cognitive mechanism behind moral sentiments and toward an account of a workable system of morality within a social context. As for this transition, Hume judged it necessary first to address the classical distinction between those attributes of man that are ‘natural’ and those that are, in contrast, ‘artificial’. Hume contended that our sentiments are natural; in so much as they are rooted in our constitution. As to whether virtue or vice is natural, Hume maintained that both virtue and vice are artificial and outside of nature. This is due to the fact that “actions themselves are artificial, and are perform’d with a certain design and intention; otherwise they cou’d never be rank’d under any of these denominations”.²¹ He concluded that “[‘T]is impossible, therefore, that the character of natural and unnatural can ever, in any sense, mark the boundaries of vice and virtue”.²² Hume therefore rejected the notion that one can create any meaningful distinction between what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘artificial’ in relation to morals.

¹⁹ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 525.

²⁰ Mercer, p. 20.

²¹ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 525.

²² Hume, *Treatise*, p. 525.

By blurring, if not indeed collapsing together the two concepts, Hume seemed to hope that that he could now reconcile the seemingly contradictory elements of sympathy and moral judgment. With the natural/artificial theoretical barrier eliminated, Hume was free to explain how the passions, spurred on by sympathy, could be tapped and moulded by a moral system that by necessity had to stand distinct from them. Hume maintained that the question which must be addressed was: "Why any action or sentiment upon the general view or survey, gives a certain satisfaction or uneasiness?"²³ In other words, the question Hume had to answer was whether a neutral moral standard could be established that would still induce an instinctive reaction of pleasure and pain which, in turn, would trigger our judgment of whether an action was or was not virtuous.

In order to achieve this, Hume had to reconcile the subjectivity of sympathy with the ethical neutrality and consistency necessitated by morality. Though the use of sympathy may expand the horizons of our personal affections, thus allowing for some modification of our self-centred sentiments, Hume realised that this does not address the fact that sympathy itself is a source of self-regard, and thus stands in need of correction. As outlined by Hume, the correction of the sentiments seems to be extremely problematic given this model, for there is nothing inherent in the 'springs and motives' of man's nature that could cause the correction at issue to occur.²⁴

While this clash between sympathetic subjectivity and moral neutrality is often depicted as a fundamental flaw in Hume's characterisation of morals,²⁵ the lack of a correcting mechanism arising from the sympathy itself does not necessarily undermine Hume's observations on the subject. Though the impetus for morality might lie in sympathy, it does not seem logically to follow that the correcting mechanism must likewise originate from that source. What we witness at this point

²³ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 527.

²⁴ Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (eds.), *Hume: A Re-Evaluation* (New York: Fordham University Press) p. 351.

²⁵ See, Livingston & King, and Mercer for an extended discussion of this matter.

is an effort by Hume to rectify his epistemological assumptions relating to the nature of the moral awareness with a socially based means of regulating and correcting it. Hume realised that at a certain point one must put theory aside and turn one's attention to the everyday world in which one finds oneself.

What we see is Hume moving toward an extra-theoretical explanation of how moral character is formed. To observe that our fundamental emotional wellsprings are the passions and that some sort of connection with these passions is to be found in our natural desire to sympathise with others seems obvious enough. Just as obvious, it would seem, is the realisation that the establishment of a moral system would necessarily entail some means of channelling that sympathetic reaction in a way consistent with achieving a societal good. In fact, it would seem to *necessarily* arise from outside the individual in order to establish the neutrality required by moral judgment.

Hume critically asserted that a symbiotic relationship between moral judgment and the passions might be the best means of discovering the nature of morality. In apparent agreement with Hutcheson, Hume believed that it was the need to tap the universal nature of the sentiments and transmit them into a communal social context that lies at the heart of morality. Hume stated that, in the end, the nature of morality: "Depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. For what else can have an influence of this nature? But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained".²⁶ However, the question still remained as to how this balance came to be struck. In the end, Hume would find his answer in the virtue known as 'justice'.

3. The Virtue of Justice, Human Convention, and the Role of Language in

²⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 75 – 76.

Understanding the Principles of Morality

Accepting at this point Hume's assertions that man's moral nature is not based simply on reason or on the sympathy alone, we have seen that Hume deemed it necessary to qualify both in light of his observations of the formation of moral sentiments on those in society he observed around him. It is left to determine how Hume did conceive of how an individual comes to an understanding of virtue and vice. Hume achieved this goal by his analysis of the virtue of justice, which is recognised as the cornerstone of his moral theory. His characterisation of this virtue and his assumptions as to why and how we come to see justice as the pivotal virtue, all point the way to an understanding of the role Hume saw language playing in the formation of our social and moral character. What comes to the fore is the fact that not only is language a social act, a convention for reflecting on conventions, and as such it is internally connected to all other conventions that spontaneously make up the human world. As a result of this fact, Hume found it useful to illustrate and substantiate his conclusions regarding the virtue of justice, and human morality generally, through extensive references to language and language use.

Armed with a methodology base on observation, and indeed participation, of the custom and prejudices of common life, we have seen that Hume had dismantled the old lines of divisions between rationalist and sentimentalist thinking. In its place it was necessary to present a new analysis of what made man a moral and social being. The answer in Hume's opinion to this long vexing riddle was to be found in the virtue of justice. The virtue of justice is the most esteemed of qualities; that of injustice, the most detested. As a result of this line of reasoning, it was posited by Hume that we cannot acquire an understanding of virtue until we have gained an understanding of justice. For it is the ability of man to gain an understanding of the concept of justice which opens the door for the creation of a moral universe. Only

with the acceptance of the dictates necessitated by justice that man can form a personal and social conception of, as well as the means to perform, virtuous conduct.

Hume substantiated this supposition by pointing out that on the face of it, we would feel no 'natural' need to fulfil the requirements of performing the virtue we call justice. He justified this contention by pointing out that we do not gain any immediate satisfaction from acting in a just manner. For example, we have no natural motive that compels us to repay a loan or recognise the sanctity of another's property. Although someone in a civilised state and trained in accordance to "a certain discipline and education" would recognise these as virtuous, an individual in a more "rude and more *natural* condition" would not.²⁷ Thus, there must be a state of virtuousness that can be created in a society that is, at the very least, cut off from this primal and instinctive distinction between virtue and vice. It was therefore imperative for Hume to discover how such sentiments could come into existence.

Hume went on to discuss why the need for justice arose in the first place. He suggested that if all people shared the exact same sentiments, their minds would be "so replete with friendship and generosity, that every man has the utmost tenderness for every man, and feels no more concern for his own interest than for that of his fellows; it seems evident, that the use of justice would, in this case, be suspended by such an extensive benevolence, nor would the divisions and barriers of property and obligation have ever been thought of".²⁸ If this were the case, there would be no reason for justice, since there would be no need to have a contract with, or promise from, an individual who was always willingly do what another wants. Hume stated, "[W]hy raise landmarks between my neighbour's field and mine, when my heart has made no division between our interests; but shares all his joys and sorrows *with the same force and vivacity* as if originally my

²⁷ Hume, Treatise, p. 531.

²⁸ Hume, Enquiry, p. 84.

own” [emphasis added]. It would seem that if our sentiments exactly matched up with those of our neighbour and all the individuals in a community were a “second self to another”, then everyone would automatically do what was best for others, even if it did them harm. In this situation, “the whole of humanity would form only one family”.²⁹

Hume also proffered the opposite extreme in which society is one in which there is such want and need that justice is pre-empted by personal necessity and self-preservation. The same can be said of the need of defence if a man falls into a “society of ruffians”. Again, one is forced to turn toward “the dictates for self-preservation alone”.³⁰ In this state, there could be no concept of justice, for the requisite conditions for man living in society are wanting. In such a state he is not afforded an opportunity to join in mutual connection with those around him. His immediate bodily safety is his only interest.

However, Hume rejected the premise that a state of nature or a state of mutual war and violence ever existed. He argued that pondering whether or not these extremes ever did exist is neither here nor there, since men are “necessarily born in a family-society, at least; and are trained up by their parents to some rule of conduct and behaviour”.³¹ In reality, “[T]he common situation of society,” Hume stated, “is a medium amidst all these extremes”. We are quite understandably guided by our own self-interest, yet also are capable of “learning the advantage of more equitable conduct”.³² To avoid destructive forms of competition, we institute conventions of justice that establish rights for individuals and that protect the common interest. These rules are not devised for completely rational, completely sympathetic, or completely benevolent persons, but for typical members of society who are limited in rationality, sympathy, and benevolence.

²⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 84.

³⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 86.

³¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 88.

³² Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 87.

Hume thus maintained that the motivation behind justice, and all other artificial virtues, does not come from self-love, or a regard for public interest, or private benevolence, or any universal motive, but rather from education and human convention. The ultimate reason for justice being deemed a moral virtue was because it serves as a central good of mankind. The same can be said of allegiance, laws of nations, modesty, and good-manners. "All these," according to Hume, "are mere human contrivances for the interest of society".³³ In so doing, he had swept aside the foundations of the selfish/altruistic debate at its most fundamental level, looking to an entirely other basis for the motivation of man's sociable nature.³⁴

Hume argued that, while the motivation for virtues such as justice ultimately traces its existence back to these innate sentiments, it remains distinctly artificial and significant. Hume maintained the primacy of our idea of justice as being central to man's social existence. Hume also contended that "public utility is the *sole* origin of justice, and that reflections on the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the *sole* foundation of its merit".³⁵ Justice is essential, "[F]or what stronger foundation can be desired or conceived for any duty, than to observe, that human society, or even human nature, could not subsist without the establishment of it".³⁶

Since utility is the sole origin of justice for Hume, he is often interpreted as a utilitarian, that is, as one who accepts the moral theory that we are obligated to maximize human welfare and minimize harmful outcomes in all circumstances. However, unlike classical Utilitarianism, Hume does not develop a normative theory in which the principle of utility reigns as the supreme foundational principle. His theory is a descriptive explaining of moral approval in terms of character traits and social practices that have utility. Utility to Hume was deemed by him to be whatever promotes the happiness of members of society or advances the public

³³ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 628.

³⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 530 – 531.

³⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 83.

³⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 96.

good. He does not develop a theory about maximum aggregate public good or about whether one system of rules is, on balance, better than another system of rules in producing utilitarian outcomes. His reflections are centred on the comparative value of having a system of conventional rules rather than no rules at all.

The reason why justice is presented as an artificial virtue is because the concept of property and the meaning of legal terms generally, are infinitely too complicated to be natural. Since justice did not simply appear out of thin air, it must have evolved out of another natural instinct. This instinct is identified by Hume as the necessity of human society, which in turn is shaped by reason and custom. As a result of this, though the virtue of justice is universal, its manifestation varies from culture to culture. In order to help the reader understand what is meant by this, Hume drew an analogy to houses. Though the style of houses may vary from region to region, they all necessarily require a roof, doors, windows, etc. Likewise, laws vary from area to area just like the design of houses; but the undercurrent of their purpose is universal and ultimately “point all to a like end”.³⁷ Thus, the duality of universal characteristics and cultural variations are once again drawn together in order to point out why similar sentiments can lead to diverse forms.

While there are a host of natural virtues that have a tendency to aid society, such as generosity, moderation, equity, meekness, etc., Hume asserted that not all of them can be simply attributed to this source. He pointed out that many philosophers would lump all virtues under that of social utility, and this would make man susceptible to the effect of artifice and education, and allow for adept politicians to attempt to manipulate and control the society. Hume countered first that there are virtues and vices which do not have a tendency toward public advantage. Second, Hume maintained that “had not men a natural sentiment of approbation and blame, it cou’d never be excited by politicians; nor wou’d the words *laudable* and *praise-worthy*, *blameable* and *odious*, be any more intelligible,

³⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 97.

than if they were a language perfectly unknown to us".³⁸ As a result of this, in a vein similar to that of Hutcheson, Hume asserted that man is naturally judgmental and that this turn reveals a fundamental element of man's ethical character.

The account of justice proffered by Hume is conventionalist. That is, moral rules, institution and practices arise and gain acceptability through social arrangement. Conventions in Hume's sense need not only involve explicit consent, promise or social contract but rather are rules almost all members of society follow in an almost all circumstances. In order for a conception of justice to arise, it requires a background framework of publicly accepted rules that are inlaid in the social mosaic of expected behaviours. Every person who follows the rules understands that the interests of everyone in society are advanced by conformity to these rules. People signal to others that they are willing to behave in certain ways when they realise that everyone will benefit from those forms of conduct. As stability, reciprocity, and trust grow, conventions are strengthened and their social utility increase.

Hume appeared to have concluded that as we are all born of man and woman, one comes into a pre-existing mini-society. Due to this fact, rules of mutual interaction immediately must arise. As this family begins to join and interact with other families, these rules enlarge themselves to encompass the scope of this new interaction. And so the process continues in ever expanding circles of influence and increasing reinforcement of those fundamental elements that make such interpersonal cohesion possible. As a consequence, "[H]istory, experience, reason sufficiently instruct us in this natural progress of human sentiments, and in the gradual enlargement of our regards to justice, in proportion as we become acquainted with the extensive utility of that virtue".³⁹

³⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 629 - 630.

³⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 89.

It is in this manner, Hume crucially concludes, that our conceptions of all virtue and vice come to be established. The longer this process continues, the more our sense of morality is refined. Hume noted that, “the more we habituate ourselves to an accurate scrutiny of morals, the more delicate feeling do we acquire of the most minute distinctions between vice and virtue. Such frequent occasion, indeed, have we, in common life, to pronounce all kinds of moral determinations, that no object of this kind can be new or unusual to us; nor could any *false* views or prepossessions maintain their ground against an experience, so common and familiar”.⁴⁰ It is through experience that we acculturate ourselves to the moral standards within the community. In so doing, we refine our ability to apply these common standards to such an extent that they begin to accommodate the whole range of societal norms. This occurs to such a degree, that our ‘prepossessions’, namely, our internal sentiments, can be deemed justly subservient to these general criteria.

What is evident here is Hume’s insistence that we enter into a pre-existing social universe from birth. Even at the level of family, fundamental concepts such as justice, custom, common experience, and rules of language use are assumed to pre-exist. By adopting this framework, the need to hypothesise about the possible extremes of human experience is pointless. The individual need not try to theorise his existence from these abstract principles, but rather can devote his energy and reason toward integrating himself into the society which exists in reality around him. In order effectively to do this, he simply must partake in social interaction. Here again, then, we see Hume dismissing the selfish/altruistic debate as irrelevant to the reality of man in the here and now.

Hume opined that in society we first learn the advantages of moral conventions and positive laws that secure rights in liberty and property. He portrayed these conventions as being shared attitudes, not necessarily articulated or formalised, that enable members of a society to complete common goals. We then abide by these

⁴⁰ Hume, Enquiry, p. 108.

conventions because they establish mutually beneficial arrangements. These arrangements establish our expectations of others, and the failure to conform to these expectations is grounds for disapprobation, condemnation, and blame. Obligations are established by the rules of expected behaviour. In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume offered an analogy to multiple oarsmen who are motivated by a commonly accepted convention to pull a boat efficiently without the existence of any formal contact or promise, because doing so is in their mutual interest. Once conventions are in place, obligations (to row, to act justly) exist and must be discharged even if we find them inconvenient, arduous, or displeasing. A person cannot escape the obligation to keep a promise merely by appealing to personal desires, plans, interests, or beliefs. Such personal pursuits do not validly override a promise. An obligation to keep the promise exists whenever the person says 'I promise' and means it, because in this act of speech the person wills and assumes the obligation. We can generalise this account of social obligation as follows. Obligation ultimately derives from social expectations and conventions; blame and disapproval follow from disappointments of social expectations and violation of conventions. This is the origin of obligation and accounts for its normative force.

In Hume's effort to illustrate how the conventions come to be formulated and established, Hume utilised analogies to language. Hume asserted:

Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv'd from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experiences of the inconveniences of transgressing it. On the contrary, this experience assures us still more, that the sense of interest has become common to all our fellows, and gives us a confidence of the future regularity of their conduct: And 'tis only on the expectation of this, that our moderation and abstinence are founded. In like manner are language gradually establish'd by human convention without any promise".⁴¹

This example was once again referenced by Hume, who noted that vocal language

was “gradually establish’d by human conventions without any promise”.⁴² These references can, and were, utilised by Hume to help illustrate his premise and make them readily accessible to the reader. The ability to make such an analogy to a readily accessible convention experienced in everyday life is simple enough. Language, being the primary medium of interpersonal communication between individuals, particularly relating to ‘higher’ more complicated elements of man’s interaction with his fellow man. It is clear that Hume realised this, and utilised language in order to illustrate this point.

However, the role of language as a tool within Hume’s theory on the development of man’s moral and sociable nature does not simply end at simple analogy. In Hume’s efforts to come to an understanding of human nature, in line with his methodological assumptions that held custom, prejudice and everyday interaction as the key to unlocking these truths, Hume went on to use references to language to support, illustrate, and justify his philosophical conclusions. Expanding beyond mere analogy, a close reading of Hume’s works reveal multifarious efforts on his part to utilise language to illustrate the human truths that lay behind our everyday assumptions and expectations when we interact within a given society.

Hume argued that moral distinctions are not derived from nature, but rather from artifice; an artifice, however, that is built upon man’s natural ability to adopt and develop such an artifice. Hume contended that, “nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections”.⁴³ The manifestation of this remedy, however, arises when men learn via “their early education in society” and have become, “sensible of the infinite advantages that result from it”.⁴⁴ Hume stated: “The shortest experience of society discovers them to every mortal; and when each individual perceives the same sense

⁴¹ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 542

⁴² Hume, *Treatise*, p. 242.

⁴³ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 540.

⁴⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 540.

of interest in all his fellows, he immediately performs his part of any contract, as being assur'd that they will not be wanting in theirs. All of them, by concert, enter into a scheme of actions, calculated for common benefit, and agree to be true to their word; nor is there any thing requisite to form this concert or convention, but that every one have a sense of interest in the faithful fulfilling of engagements, and express that sense to other members of the society".⁴⁵ Hume was quick to note that this ability to follow their natural proclivity and to couple with it the utilitarian artificial construct is closely associated with the need for the individual to "have besides acquir'd a new affection to company and conversation".⁴⁶

That the understanding of artificial virtue develops in association with language seems to have been important to Hume, because both were judged by him to be derived from human convention. Human convention, that is, which in turn taps into the desire of individuals to communicate accurately their sentiments to others. It is on this basis that the materials for the construction of both man's conception of virtue and language itself took place. As with language, the process of learning to communicate adequately the precepts of human virtues developed by trial and error over time, through the 'inconveniences' of its transgression. The inconvenience rests in the inability to partake accurately in the medium of exchange within the larger community. As with the misuse or wrong interpretation of words, the misuse or wrong interpretation of what is or is not virtuous causes one to become isolated from those around him. So too, if one fails to maintain predictability in discourse or fails in the requirement that correct signs be made as are necessary, one cannot partake in the linguistic or moral universe of the community.

What is it then about the nature of justice and language that allows it to form the groundwork upon which this utility argument is laid? It becomes clear within the *Enquiry* that Hume was aware of the degree to which legal obligations mirror the *implicit* agreement between members of a linguistic group regarding

⁴⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 574 - 575.

⁴⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 540.

communication in general. It is his account of the fundamental relationship between these two processes that we shall now explore. Closely coupled in Hume's mind with this idea of social utility in relation to justice, is the corresponding utility demonstrated in interpersonal interaction. Hume argued that as the oppositions of interest and self-love can be constrained by the establishment of a system of justice, in like manner the 'eternal contrarieties' of men in company can be managed through the promotion of polite conversation and manners. Like justice, the ultimate utility of the promotion of conversation for the betterment of society is clear, though those who participate in it may not directly realize that they are promoting social utility themselves. Lastly, not only is society at large served by the institution of justice and polite conversation, but also those who participate, the individuals who are seen to promote both, are judged by society at large to be virtuous people. The clear correlation between the utility of justice and the utility of polite conversation for making a functioning society is lucidly and concisely spelled out in this passage, and it seems clear that the combination of both were seen as central to a smoothly functioning social order. (See Appendix A)

The correlation between justice and language within Hume's writings took on more legalistic forms as well. Hume asserted in a footnote that in order for a legal obligation to be entered into, it must be expressed by words or signs.⁴⁷ Though this may seem self-evident, the use of language as the medium of legal obligation carries along with it all the obligations of linguistic convention as well. In a very real sense, the legal standards of contract simply mirror what is assumed in everyday speech, that each party is acting honestly and that the nature of the item in question is seen in the same way by both parties. Legal contractual language is merely a formal expression of what we all implicitly assume in our daily interaction. Hume seemed to have picked up on this point and developed it in his discussion of justice.

⁴⁷ Hume, Enquiry, p. 139.

Hume stated that, “[T]he expression being once brought in as subservient to the will, soon becomes the principle part of the promise; nor will a man be less bound by his word, though he secretly give a different direction to his intention, and withhold the assent of his mind”.⁴⁸ Here we see the fundamental premises of linguistic convention spelled out in a legalistic form. Though the meeting of the minds is the ideal, the only means by which an individual has for accessing another’s mind, and thus their intentions, is through language. Since the honesty and sincerity of that statement must be assumed for any legal system, or linguistic system, to have validity, the spoken word is held to be binding over the individual’s internal intent or assent. If this were not presumed, legal or verbal interaction could not take place. Thus, the justification for this rather harsh penalty for miscommunication is based upon the trust and reliance of the other party who based his own decisions on the veracity of the individual whose intent is ultimately wanting.

If the other party, however, in any way feels that the communication he or she receives is somehow lacking in clear and honest intent, then there is no longer an assumption that the statement made is binding. “But though the expression makes, on most occasions, the whole of the promise,” Hume proceeded, “yet it does not always so; and one who should make use of any expression, of which he knows the meaning, and which he uses without any sense of the consequences, would not be bound ... it is necessary, that the words be a perfect expression of the will, without any contrary signs”.⁴⁹ If for any reason the other party sees signs that there is a lack of understanding between them, then he is put on notice that a miscommunication might be occurring. In such an instance the other party is effectively put on notice that the other individual is somehow failing to convey a clear intent via his communication. In such a situation, the lack of a clear ‘meeting of the minds’ is evident within the public realm. Since the binding obligation is

⁴⁸ Hume, Enquiry, f. n. 4, p. 95.

⁴⁹ Hume, Enquiry, f. n. 4, p. 95.

meant to exist only through the sincere belief in the reliability of the spoken word or actions, in such a case there is no obligation because this belief is not legitimate.

This does not extend, however, to situations where the individual is attempting to deceive the other person. Hume cautioned, “[N]ay, even this we must not carry so far as to imagine, that one, whom, by our quickness of understanding, we conjecture, from certain signs, to have an intention of deceiving us, is not bound by his expression or verbal promise, if we accept of it; but must limit this conclusion to those cases where the signs are of a different nature from those of deceit”. In the case of deception, the goals of truth and honesty in the communication of intent are clearly violated from the beginning. Again, both the entire system of law and communication in general, are undermined if one party does not intend honestly to enter into an understanding and agreement with another. In line with this, Hume concluded by saying that, “empty words alone, without any meaning or intention in the speaker, can never be attended with any effect”.⁵⁰

Thus, the ‘rules’ of legal engagement are generally the same as those of social engagement. Both are dependent on language and signs to convey intent, and both rely on clear interpretation and honest intent on the part of all parties. The importance of justice merely reflects the centrality of honest communication more generally. If the utility of justice was seen by Hume as the very foundation of society, this was in no small part due to the fact that the law embodies the more general conventions reflecting social norms which are assumed by him to be present in all language use.

Given this framework, it becomes apparent that Hume’s discussion of justice in the *Enquiry* builds on the assumptions first put forward in the *Treatise*. Hume depicted Justice as the archetypal example of a social virtue. Created out of man’s needs, and designed to ensure that the bonds of the community can be strengthened, justice is the very embodiment of man’s social nature. In order to achieve this lofty

⁵⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 95.

position, though, the virtue of justice is dependent on the medium of language and assumptions embodied in it. Language is not simply the medium by which law and justice are carried out. The necessity of truthfulness and the correlation of sentiments sanctified in law are requisite in all inter-personal communication. Since these characteristics are implicit in language use, the law is simply an articulation of that assumed fact. This being the case, the central importance of the virtue of justice to Hume appeared to revolve around the reality that it was the most clear example of the force of linguistic convention in action.

Words and moral sentiments are both dependent upon our understanding of them. The object signified by a sign in a given language must be understandable to another individual, who must in turn, transform that sign into an internal signification in a like manner to that of the first individual. If a moral system is not likewise grounded in a standardised set of 'signifying' signs relating to specific sentiments, it would lack any ability to conceive of virtue or vice. It therefore appears that Hume too assumed at this point the implicit connection drawn by Hutcheson between the use of language and the confirmation of a universal ethical nature.

While the natural inclination to exchange sentiments with others must exist, it served as merely the impetus of such an interchange. Ultimately, it is the accurate communication and interpretation of the external signs that dictate this process. Hume states, "I say, *first*, that a promise is not intelligible naturally, nor antecedent to human conventions; and that a man, unacquainted with society, could never enter into any engagements with another, even tho' they could perceive each other's thoughts by intuition. If I promise to be natural and intelligible, there must be some act of the mind attending these words, *I promise*; and on this act of the mind must the obligation depend".⁵¹ If an individual makes a promise, the speech act follows certain conventions that normally arouse an expectation in the audience that the individual will perform the promised act. That it does so makes the

⁵¹ Hume, *Treatis*, p. 568.

individual's speech act a promise, even if that person means to break it. Likewise, since certain conventions normally convey attitudes, evaluative expressions are among these conventional vehicles of communication. Because these represent conventions of the language, the audience normally understands the individual to have the corresponding attitudes, regardless of whether he actually does so or not.⁵² Hume supported this contention with the following analogy, "the external form of words, being mere sound, require an intention to make them have any efficacy; and that this intention being once consider'd as a requisite circumstance, its absence must equally prevent the effect, whether avow'd or conceal'd, whether sincere or deceitful".⁵³

What becomes evident is that Hume saw language itself as serving the same utilitarian role as his primary virtue, justice. While Hume admitted that "it is certain, that, wherever we go, whatever we reflect on or converse about, everything still presents us with the view of human happiness or misery, and excites in our breasts a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness"⁵⁴ Hume did not try to deny that we react in such a manner, nor that such reactions are part of what makes us human, but what he did argue was that we must have a societal concern beyond these immediate instinctive responses, and only in this manner can we enter into the realm of morality. For general principles of humanity, "must, at all times, have *some* authority over our sentiments, and give us a general approbation of what is useful to society, and blame of what is dangerous and pernicious. The degrees of these sentiments may be the subject of controversy, but the reality of their existence, one should think, must be admitted in every theory and system."⁵⁵

Not denying the influence, or indeed human importance, of the sympathetic mechanism, he nevertheless came to stress how and why we live as social and moral beings. He stated, "[S]ympathy, we must allow, is much fainter than our

⁵² Mary Gore Forrester, Moral Language (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) p. 99.

⁵³ Hume, Treatise, p. 577.

⁵⁴ Hume, Enquiry, p. 110.

⁵⁵ Hume, Enquiry, p. 114

concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near or contiguous; but for this very reason it is necessary for us, in our calm judgements and discourse concerning the character of men, to neglect all differences, and render our sentiments more public and social”.⁵⁶ For Hume, to be moral was to be social, and to be social was to be moral. As a result, he moved to centre stage social utility and convention as the foundation of all moral sentiments, and in so doing could assert that “we are always inclined, from our natural philanthropy, to give preference to the happiness of society, and consequently to virtue above the opposite.”⁵⁷

Hume’s placing of societal utility and convention at the centre of his moral theory, necessarily requires that one distance himself from an immediate sympathetic or purely self-interested act and, instead, engages in a common medium of accepted social standards. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to stand back and make a judgement as to what “corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions”.⁵⁸ The reason why this is so important is that:

[w]ithout such a correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary light and positions. [new paragraph] The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarised to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other. Every man’s interest is peculiar to himself, and the aversions and desires, which result from it, cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interest of the community.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

⁵⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

⁵⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

⁵⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 115 – 116.

Here we see evidenced the role of language and language use within Hume's theory, the means by which one comes to understand, transmit and modify communal moral conventions.

Hume did not go so far as to eliminate the idea of innate sentiments and their associated reactions. Rather, he attempted to distinguish them from the socialised conception of what is deemed virtuous. These virtues are identifiable by, and through, the medium of linguistic conventions. "But tho' this self-interested commerce of men begins to take place, and to predominate in society," Hume argued, "it does not entirely abolish the more generous and noble intercourse of friendship and good offices. I may still do services to such persons as I love, and am more particularly acquainted with, without any prospect of advantage; and they may make me a return in the same manner, without any view but that of recompensing my past services." In order, therefore, to distinguish these two different sorts of commerce, the interested and the disinterested, Hume goes on to immediately point out that there is "*a certain form of words* invented for the former, by which we bind ourselves to the performance of any action. This form of words constitutes what we call a *promise*, which is the sanction of the interested commerce of mankind".⁶⁰

This being the case, it is at this point in Hume's theory that he points out that the signs themselves can take on qualities that are very much independent of the underlying sentiments. "They are the conventions of men," Hume asserted, "which create a new motive, when experience has taught us, that human affairs wou'd be conducted much more for mutual advantage, were there certain *symbols* or *signs* instituted, by which we might give each other security of our conduct in any particular incident. After the meaning of these signs become widely recognised, whomever uses them is immediately bound by his interests to execute his engagements, and must never expect to be trusted any more, if he refuses to

⁶⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 574.

perform what he promis'd".⁶¹ It is the need to build this atmosphere of trust and reliability that necessitates the curbing of the natural sentiments in line with these expectations. As a result, Hume at this point reiterated that a promise must be expressed in "words or signs, in order to impose a tie upon any man".⁶² Due to the binding and mutual obligation of the contractual relationship, even if the individual's internal intention differs from the expressed; he is still bound by his word as long as the original intent to be bound was present in the first place.

At the conclusion of his discussion of the artificial virtues, Hume summarised his findings that justice and the other artificial virtues are ultimately shaped by, "[P]ublic interest, education, and the *artifice of politicians*".⁶³ While we may feel no instinctive moral obligation toward such matters, we do have the capacity either to "surmount or elude" these qualms. In order to do this we "*feign* a new act of the mind, which we call the *willing* an obligation; and on this we suppose the morality to depend. But we have prov'd already, that there is no such act of the mind, and consequently that promises imposed no natural obligation".⁶⁴ In the end, Hume still maintained that the two key elements of binding moral intercourse must be met, namely, the correlation of internal intent and the external expression of that intent. Yet with creation of the conception of what is or not virtuous through linguistic convention, the necessity of this dual relation between the thing signified and the signifier is quite remote from its initial characterisation.

In order to avoid claims of scepticism, Hume once again presented his recurring assertion that moral conventions are ultimately founded on innate characteristics inherent in all men. He accomplished this once again through a discussion of linguistic convention. In order to do so, Hume must first avoid the sceptical argument which dictates that moral distinctions simply arise from education rather than from an innate sense of utility, and were thus invented

⁶¹ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 575.

⁶² Hume, *Treatise*, p. 575.

⁶³ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 575.

⁶⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 575.

afterward through being encouraged, “by the art of politicians, in order to render men tractable, and subdue their natural ferocity and selfishness, which incapacitates them for society”⁶⁵ Hume was willing to admit that education has a very powerful influence not only on shaping the sentiments, but also in the creation of new sentiments. “But that *all* moral affection or dislike arises from this origin,” asserted Hume, “will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer. Had nature made no such distinction, found on the original constitution of the mind, the words, *honourable* and *shameful*, *lovely* and *odious*, *noble* and *despicable*, had never had a place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever have been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey an idea to the audience”.⁶⁶ Hume argued that there must always remain an underlying connection to the innate sentiments, a ‘natural beauty and amiableness’ in relation to the social virtues which are felt even among ‘uninstructed mankind’. If this were not the case, then man would have no motivation to express them in language, let alone adapt and manipulate them.

Significantly, the reality revealed by linguistic convention strikes the balance between the theoretical dilemma faced by Hume regarding the relationship between reason and the sentiments. As this relates to the immediacy associated with sentiments, Hume maintained that his familiarity with language allows an individual to recognise instantly both ‘estimable and blameable’ qualities. This ability to make judgements almost immediately, and to determine merit and demerit, is seen as essential if moral judgements are truly going to touch human nature. Thus, an individual ‘without any reasoning’ is able to determine instantly the moral nature of an act. The instinctive ability to use language, and the associated recognized meaning – in this case moral, further ensures that these judgments are easily accessible.

⁶⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 105.

⁶⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 105.

For an act cannot qualify as virtuous unless they had already been widely approved, creating a 'general opinion' in society. To deem that someone has acted virtuously requires a social history through which the character traits we denominate virtues have been distinguished from other character traits. To ascertain whether we have appropriate moral responses in particular cases, Hume says we must place our sentiments, our approvals, preferences, recommendations and the like, into the public arena to see if impartial persons concur. Only then can we reliably discover whether we 'touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord'. Whereas virtue requires a history of public approbation, the mere property of being truthful does not. Hume's thesis is that character traits such as honesty cannot qualify as virtues unless there has been a history of approbation by impartial observers; but once that history is in place, it is irrelevant whether observers actually notice that a person is virtuous.

To guarantee that this is not simply a relativistic individual determination, which would negate the essential public nature of morality, Hume pointed out the simple fact that language is communal and uniform within a given society. Drawing correlations to linguistic convention instantly ensures Hume's conception of morality is more predictable, definite and fixed, thus freeing it from the intractability of individual experiences and sentiments. By drawing a nexus to language use, Hume places moral judgement not so much in the hands of the experiences of single individuals, but rather in the shared experiences of the society in which they live. It also allows them to have an independent standard of judgement, fixed in linguistic usage, by which to judge their own personal moral actions.

Through Hume's use of linguistic convention, morality is depicted as a public rather than a private matter, free of any claims of moral scepticism or individual introspection occurring in isolation from the communal standards which exist around them. It would seem impossible, given Hume's assumptions, that one could even participate in the act of speaking without making judgments based upon these

standards. On a grander scale, language itself could not exist, according to this premise, without the mass of humanity having a large degree of conforming sentiments from which distinctions are made. Freed from the shackles of moral scepticism, language can be seen as the antithesis of this problem, a social phenomenon that is both predictable and immediately accessible. The moral standards of a given society are founded not by the experience of any one individual, but instead by the communal experience of sentiments. This communal conception in turn provides a sounding board for the individual in making his or her moral judgements.

How is this judgment to be made? In Hume's opinion, it could be most easily accomplished by utilising the existing moral norms discoverable in the linguistic conventions of the society in which individuals find themselves. Hume stated that: "The very nature of language guides us almost infallibly in forming a judgement of this nature; and as every tongue possesses one set of words which are taken in a good sense, and another in the opposite, the least acquaintance with the idiom suffices, without any reasoning, to direct us in collecting and arranging the estimable or blameable qualities of men. The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived".⁶⁷ Hume therefore recognised that man participates in a society in which a linguistic framework already exists. This existing pattern of language use allows anyone who is familiar with that language to participate instantly in the existing moral universe.

However, though man may very well come into a world in which pre-existing moral and social norms are enshrined and embodied in linguistic convention, it still remains to be explained why these norms exist in the first place. Hume therefore turned to his attention to why social and moral norms take the form they do. It is at

⁶⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 76 – 77.

this juncture that Hume made the crucial connection between the utility of these norms within a given society and the role of linguistic convention in supporting this process.

As we have seen, Hume was anxious to ensure that his explanation of human morality still retained the idea that actual sentiments are exchanged between individuals. Though our judgment of others ultimately rests on what we can take in by external signs, Hume at this point still maintained, much in keeping with his previous discussion of the passions and sympathy, that there must be an accurate correlation between these signs and the sentiment which lies behind them, if their interpretation by another was deemed to be legitimate: "Tis evident that when we praise any actions, we regard only the motives that produced them, and consider the action as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper. The external performance has no merit. We must look within to find the moral quality. This we cannot do directly; and therefore fix our attention on actions, as on external signs. But these actions are still considered as signs; and the ultimate object of our praise and approbation is the motive, that produc'd them".⁶⁸

It was Hume's contention that virtuous motives are always necessary to make an action virtuous. "In short," Hume stated, "it may be establish'd as an undoubted maxim, *that no action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality*".⁶⁹ It is also clear that Hume was anxious to keep his idea rooted in man's innate character. This was perhaps an effort to avoid accusations of moral scepticism when he ultimately introduced his correcting mechanism. This grounding in man's nature is judged by Hume to be essential in the formation of man's character, and he rebuffs any claim that these fundamental characteristics can be fundamentally altered by man, and rather quips that only 'omnipotence' could ever 'new-mould the human mind' away from this set course. But while these 'inherent principles and passions of human nature' cannot be made anew, Hume recognises almost in the same

⁶⁸ Hume, Treatise, p. 529.

breath that those that do exist can be moulded by man to take various courses. For example, Hume argued that it would be impossible for 'moralist or politicians' to ever make any ground in changing the 'fundamental articles' of man toward the public interest. What is open to them, however, is to bend those existing human characteristics as they find them into a 'new direction' and teach how we can satisfy our needs by shaping them in a certain proscribed manner, convincing the individual in question that it is in their best interest, and in the end, better for the society as a whole.⁷⁰ It is clear that Hume conceived of the individual's natural sentiments as open to alteration, and that this fact opened the door for an explanation as to how this alteration could be accomplished. In one motion, Hume was able to stress the fact that the sentiments at the root of social interaction are inherent and inalterable on the grand scale, but at the same time was able to push home his contention that within the available spectrum of human temperament, man is open to control and alteration of these sentiments in the hands of society forces,

Having admitted that the natural sentiments were alterable, he next conceded that for this to occur, an individual need not in all instances be moved by innate sentiments. For example, an individual may perform an action not from a naturally arising virtuous motive, but rather from a certain sense of duty, either to habituate himself into such moral motivation, or at least "disguise to himself, as much as possible, his want of it".⁷¹ Granting this concession, Hume was quick to tie this notion to his conception of the innate effect that such an action still had, and to the fact that though the sign did not actually represent the thing signified, the observer still felt some moral approbation.

Hume also appeared to maintain that the simple fact that the individual's attempting to act in a moral manner out of duty, in itself, has some sort of moral beauty. He stated, "[A]ctions are at first only consider'd as signs of motives: But

⁶⁹ Hume, Treatise, pp. 530 - 531.

⁷⁰ Hume, Treatise, p. 573.

⁷¹ Hume, Treatise, p. 531.

'tis usual, in this case, as in all others, to fix our attention on the signs, and neglect, in some measure, the thing signified. But tho', on some occasions, a person may perform an action merely out of regard to its moral obligation, yet still this supposes in human nature some distinct principles, which are capable of producing the action, and whose moral beauty renders the action meritorious".⁷² Having acknowledged that at times the sign used by an individual may not necessarily have correlated with the actual passion the person felt, Hume maintained that this act somehow tapped into other, more indirect, sentiments.

With the introduction of the ability to signify to another in a manner that only indirectly triggers feelings of virtuousness, Hume went on to "apply all this to the present case".⁷³ Having not only introduced the idea that one can separate signification from the sentiments an individual immediately holds, but also that this process can still be deemed virtuous, he went on to argue that the development of conception of virtue would be completely unintelligible if our judgment of virtue revolved around a simple innate sympathy mechanism. Having established the legitimacy of this contention, Hume still had to demonstrate the way in which we come to habituate ourselves into this pattern of action in the formation and legitimisation of the artificial virtues.

Hume does not seem to mean that we must actually experience feelings of approbation or disapprobation whenever we make a moral judgement about a person's virtue. He apparently means that the actions and character traits that we call virtuous would not qualify as virtuous unless they had already been widely approved, creating a 'general opinion' in society. To designate someone as having a virtue requires a social history through which the character traits we denominate virtues have been distinguished from other character traits, such as ingenuity and endurance.

⁷² Hume, Treatise, p. 531.

⁷³ Hume, Treatise, p. 531.

4. Hume on the Formation of Moral Standards

Given this, Hume proffered an explanation as to how we go about adjusting our moral sentiments in order to avoid our natural tendency to act prejudicial and sympathise more with those closest to us. He stated that this ability is “the easiest matter in the world to account for”, and was demonstrated by the fact that the closeness or remoteness of sympathetic connection is in constant flux. Hume held that all sentiments of praise and blame vary according to the particulars of a given situation. One’s nearness or remoteness to the object being judged affects our passions in such a manner as if “we remained in one point of view”.⁷⁴ But in judging these situations, we cannot use a fixed point of view as a basis for moral judgement. A fixed point of view is by its very nature a biased point of view, and it is Hume’s fundamental dilemma to explain how we transform our reactions from such a fixed, prejudiced and individual point of view into such a form as to effectively make a moral judgement. This necessitates the existence of a neutral, social, and recognised medium of judgment to overcome not only the inability of communication of the sentiment without such a medium, but also the inability to make a legitimate moral judgement.

This dilemma is not only true of sympathy, but of every other interaction between an individual and the world around him. It is in man’s general ability to make these corrections in everyday life *via language* that Hume found the useful in illustrating and substantiating his claims about the way the correction of the sentiments takes place. The fact that an individual in every aspect of his life constantly has to adjust his unique perspective to make sense of the world means that the adjustment of the sentiments takes place in a similar manner. Hume stated, “[B]esides, every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and

⁷⁴ Hume, Treatise, p. 632.

‘tis impossible we cou’d ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view”.⁷⁵

Here again we see the connection made by Hume between language and morals. It seems clear that Hume was not merely claiming that the development of moral character was analogous to language, but rather that, without the medium of language, we could not create the moral universe in the first place. If we were not able to remove ourselves and actively participate in the larger world, via language, no neutral human interaction could take place. Hume’s theory not only depended on the simple fact that human beings communicate through speech, but that the creation of a language through the faculty of speech enshrines within it the neutrality, predictability, and communal acceptance so necessary to a working system of morals. Thus, his theory not only adopts the use, but also the essential qualities of language, “[I]n order, therefore, to prevent those continual *contradictions*, and arrive at a more *stable* judgment of things,” Hume stated, “we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation”.⁷⁶

The need for the introduction of such a corrective mechanism brought Hume’s discussion of language to the fore. For example, we see in the final pages of the *Treatise*’s examination of morals a closely strung series of references to language.⁷⁷ It appears in these closing stages of this work that Hume came to realise the importance of language as a means by which any commonly held medium of exchange would necessarily have to take on the structure of linguistic convention. For Hume, the role of language in relation to the progression of moral sense extended far beyond mere analogy. For without the ability of interpersonal communication through a common medium, two individuals could never be sure whether or not they were talking about the same perception of virtue.

⁷⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 632.

⁷⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 632

⁷⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 631 – 642.

In addition, for this communication of the sentiments to take place, there must be some agreement as to what shall be held to be true. Thus, trust is necessary for the possibility of communication.⁷⁸ That an individual can expect others to use terms as he or she uses them requires that these terms have the same reference for all the speakers of a language. This means that the same criteria must be used for identifying the same reference and also that there will be agreement that if a term applies correctly to an item, then that item must satisfy the criteria. Not only must there be agreement in this belief, but there must also be a determination to retain this belief even in the face of apparent conflicts with the passions. This determination is at least partly grounded in the realisation that it is necessary to retain the mutual trust and expectation that others will use expressions as we do. The ability of some individual's to relate to each other in such a manner assumes that there is some tacit agreement to accept as true a statement when and only when that specific sign is used. In other words, if the sign is to stand for anything, there is a necessity for a conventional acceptance of certain beliefs within the society in which it is used.

Based on these conditions, Hume critically went on to assert, "[E]xperience soon teaches us this method of correcting our sentiments, or at least, of correcting our language, where the sentiments are more stubborn and inalterable".⁷⁹ At this point, it would seem that Hume had turned his fundamental premise as to the correlation between the passions, sympathy and morals on its head. Having defended for so long the necessary correlation between the actual sentiment being felt and the true signification of that sentiment, it would seem that he now maintained that it is the words themselves which carry the moral approbation. The use of the words 'stubborn' and 'inalterable' would seem to imply that the natural reaction is, if not wrong, somehow lacking in legitimacy in relation to socially acceptable conceptions of virtue. Certainly, Hume was not maintaining that one

⁷⁸ Forrester, p. 52.

⁷⁹ Hume, Treatise, p. 633.

might merely pay lip service to communal moral standards. A moral determination could not be made in such a situation. What appears to be implied by this statement is that during the course of socialisation, one will at times have to act in a manner that conforms to the societal rules of morality, without necessarily correlating with one's own sentiments.

Hume continued, "[S]uch corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed 'twere impossible we cou'd ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation".⁸⁰ Here Hume acknowledged the fact that it is necessary for individuals to use signs in the same way, for otherwise, it would be impossible for anyone to understand how that sign was being used. If we break away from this commonly recognised medium, it would have serious repercussions upon our ability to understand what others are talking about.

This procedure crucially does not require that any speaker actually has the attitude in question, but only that this would be the attitude conveyed. According to conventions of the language, he would be taken as intending others to understand him to have this attitude. If he does not in fact have these sentiments, he may very well be violating his own passions; nevertheless, by uttering the sentence he did in the given circumstances, he used the conventions of language to instil in the other person a belief that he did indeed have that attitude, even if he in fact did not. Due to the nature of the conventions of language, the audience understands the speaker to have the corresponding attitudes, whether or not the individual actually does.

Hume maintained that, in the end, while the internal modification of our sentiments might not be possible, this inability does not affect the medium of moral exchange itself. He stated that the "passions do not always follow our corrections; but these corrections serve sufficiently to regulate our abstract notions, and are alone regarded, when we pronounce in general concerning the degrees of vice and

⁸⁰ Hume, Treatise, p. 633.

virtue”.⁸¹ The next sentence immediately continued:

‘Tis observ’d by critics, that all words or sentences, which are difficult to the pronunciation, are disagreeable to the ear. There is no difference, whether a man hear them pronounc’d or read them silently to himself. When I run over a book with my eye, I imagine I hear it all; and also, by the force of imagination, enter into the uneasiness, which the delivery of it wou’d give the speaker. The uneasiness is not real; but as such a composition of words has a natural tendency to produce it, this is sufficient to affect the mind with a painful sentiment, and render the discourse harsh and disagreeable. ‘Tis a similar case, where any real quality is, by accidental circumstances, render’d impotent, and is depriv’d of its natural influence on society.⁸²

The utilisation of this analogy to language to illustrate and substantiate his claim regarding how we see the nature of virtue and vice playing out in the society is a good example of what Hume appears to be doing with reference to his moral theory. Words and language are presented in this situation as a useful and easily accessible means of validating his contentions regarding how the sentiments of the individual are moved. Going beyond this, it seems that there is room to argue that the realm of language and the realm of morals were both so tied to human convention, that the structure and limitations of the former shed light onto the structure and limitations of the latter.

Hume seemingly was confident that ultimately we engage in what amounts to a societal ‘language’ of moral discourse, even though at times our internal sentiments may contradict it. He noted: “The *seeming tendencies* of objects affect the mind: And the emotions they excite are of a like species with those, which proceed from the *real consequences* of objects, but their feeling is different. Nay, these emotions are so different in their feeling, that they may often be contrary, without destroying each other. ... The imagination adheres to the *general* views of things, and distinguishes the feelings they produce, from those which arise from our particular

⁸¹ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 636.

⁸² Hume, *Treatise*, p. 636.

and momentary situation”.⁸³ Thus, Hume came to the realisation that if individuals are to be able to communicate with each other, they must agree on the truthful use of the medium of personal exchange. Otherwise, without such fixed points of agreement, they could not be sure if they were speaking of the same objects.

The ultimate establishment of the legitimacy of this moral language as the guiding principle of personal conduct within society is openly acknowledged. Reiterating that “ ‘tis impossible men cou’d ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to them all,” Hume once again stressed the need for a common medium of moral language. The individual is ultimately willing to curb the instinctive sympathetic response in favour of the security and predictability offered by such a medium. “And tho’ such interests and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own,” Hume noted, “yet being more constant and universal, they counterbalance the latter even in practice, and are alone admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality. They alone produce that particular feeling or sentiment, on which moral distinctions depend”.⁸⁴

Hume appeared to have recognised that one can justify particular moral judgments only by means of moral principles to which one is also committed, and obedience to which the individual would prescribe for all persons including him or herself. As long as members of a society are committed to the same principles, their moral beliefs can also be brought into agreement. If they do not share common principles, however, then agreement as to moral standards could never be reached. As Mary Gore Forrester notes in her book *Moral Language*, “[T]o claim that there are truth conditions for the employment of an expression, yet deny that these are reflected in the way that we use the expression, makes no sense. If there are any fundamental criteria for moral rightness, the mature speakers of a given

⁸³ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 637.

⁸⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 642.

language will use terms for moral rightness in accordance with those criteria”.⁸⁵ Hume appreciated the fundamental truth of this assertion, and judged it important in his efforts to describe the formation and operation of the moral sense. Though the origin and motivation behind the various forms of virtue may vary, the means by which the essential neutral and social aspects of morality are instilled into an individual’s conception of ‘virtuous behaviour’ depends on his or her moral sense conforming to generally recognized and neutral society standards, as reflected in linguistic convention. These being the case, references to language on the part of Hume were oft times analogies, but analogies which derived much of their validity from the fact that moral and linguistic conventions, being conventions, largely were constructed in a similar matter and in the end played off each other in creating societal norms of behaviour.

5. The Individual’s Development of Moral Consciousness

Having discussed the means by which Hume utilised references to linguistic convention to help demonstrate how general societal standards or morality come to be established within a social context, it remains to be seen how the individuals themselves become socialised to accept and respond to these standards. In his efforts to explain this process, we once again witness on the part of Hume the utilisation of reference to conventions of language and language use. In the *Enquiry*, Hume presented the fundamental steps that lead one from individual isolation to acceptance and involvement in the wider moral community. The way this is illustrated by Hume is through, first, the acceptance of the need for adopting linguistic convention in order to convey the sentiments, and, second, the use of linguistic convention to modify these sentiments. These references were the most readily accessible means available to Hume in order to guide his reader into an understanding of how, and by what process, an understanding of societal moral norms can be internalized.

⁸⁵ Forrester, p. 140.

The initial stage of this process involved the necessity of a neutral perspective in order to communicate generally, and to transmit our sentiments more particularly. As Hume noted, “[b]esides, that we ourselves often change our situation in this particular, we everyday meet with persons who are in a situation different from us, and who could never converse with us were we to remain constantly in that position and point of view, which is particular to ourselves”.⁸⁶ Approaching the world from a unique and private perspective necessarily results in the individual being isolated from his or her fellow beings. Due to the fact that each individual’s experiences, associations, and perceived sentiments are different, one must seek out a common perspective in order to have a shared medium of communication which allows the sentiments to be shared.

In order to accommodate this need for a common medium for exchange of sentiment, language was enlisted by Hume to expedite the process. “The distinction, therefore,” Hume stated, “between these species of sentiments being so great and evident, language must soon be moulded upon it, and must invent a peculiar set of terms, in order to express those universal sentiments of censure or approbation, which arise from humanity. ... Virtue and vice become then known; morals are recognized; certain general ideas are framed of human conduct and behaviour ... and by such universal principles are the particular sentiments of self-love frequently controlled and limited”.⁸⁷ Hume maintained that, “[T]he intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners”.⁸⁸ Only through such a fixed societal standard can communication between individuals take place and society be formed. Such a common medium of exchange is enshrined in the linguistic conventions of that society. By allowing for the ability to praise or blame, yet in a way relative to some sort of standardised object of judgment, the association of moral sense with linguistic convention results in predictable patterns of approval and disapproval. Significantly, this

⁸⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

⁸⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 149.

⁸⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

pattern of usage also accommodates the development of principles of judgment with which to gauge personal reactions.

As evidenced in the closing pages of the *Treatise*, the modification of one's individual sentiments done in order to partake in this common medium of exchange is seen as imperative in the *Enquiry*. As Hume noted, "[A]nd, indeed, without such correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiments, men could never even think or talk steadily on any subject".⁸⁹ Only if individuals have a common sentimental disposition can language itself be comprehensible. In order to achieve this, individuals must do one of two things. The first option open to the individual is willing modification their internal sentiments to match those they judge to be in line with the dictates of linguistic convention. Alternatively, they must be willing to resist the urging of their internal sentiments and communicate a modification of those sentiments in order to communicate them to another in a way consistent with linguistic convention. In either case, the individuals must make compromises regarding their sentiments in order to participate socially with those around them.⁹⁰

Through the medium of language, and the construction of linguistic conventions around the sentiments, man was depicted by Hume as being able to break free of his own individual perspective and enter into a dialogue with others. This dialogue can take place because the individuals now have a common frame of reference. By this system, standards can be created and individual sentiments compared to the criteria enshrined in linguistic convention and the more selfish leanings of individual sentiments can be restrained. Thus, with the connection of sentiments to language, there is a spontaneous and almost instant creation of a moral universe within any society that begins to dictate individual behaviour.

⁸⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 1115.

⁹⁰ The option to completely opt out from the moral conventions, will be dealt with in the discussion of *Appendix IV: Of Some Verbal Disputes*. It will suffice for now to simply note that one could also act only on their internal sentiments, but this would not qualify as a moral decision.

Hume, having described why it is necessary to have a medium of common communication, and why we yield to linguistic convention in order to participate in that medium, went on to explain how the medium itself comes to shape and refine our moral sentiments. In order to accurately master and wholly participate in the exchange of moral sentiments, it is necessary to engage as much as possible in the medium of linguistic conventions within a given society. “[T]he more we converse with mankind,” Hume noted, “and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarised to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other”.⁹¹ It is through engaging in such linguistic discourse that we come to learn the rules of linguistic convention and, in turn, the rules which guide the morality of a given society. Only in this way can we refine our moral sense and adequately transmit through conversation our refined sentiments of virtue and vice to others. Thus, the very act of speaking refines one’s ethics. In this manner participation leads to refinement, and refinement accentuates participation.⁹² Once we engage in language use, we are immediately caught up in the insular nature of this process of moral refinement.

The impact of this process in establishing social norms, as enshrined in the linguistic conventions of that society, is profound. The homogenising affect that this operation creates a moral universe in which general societal standards come to take precedence over individual sentiments. Hume stated that as benevolent concern for others is shared by all men, at least to a certain degree, “it occurs more frequently in discourse, is cherished by society and conversation, and the blame and approbation, consequent on it, are thereby roused from the lethargy in which they are probably lulled, in solitary and uncultivated nature. Other passions, though perhaps originally stronger, yet being selfish and private, are often overpowered by its force, and yield the dominion of our breast to those social and

⁹¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115

⁹² This system of refinement through conversation certainly reflects the contentions of Addison and seems to be implicit in Hutcheson, in regard to the importance of conversation to the refinement of our moral awareness, though it is very doubtful that either would agree with Hume’s characterisation of morals more

public principles”.⁹³ Through the shaping forces of the linguistic conventions, the moral sense of all the individuals within the society becomes not only more uniform, but also enlivened. This is due perhaps to the fact that these efforts arouse man’s innate social character and thus quicken those instincts which otherwise lie dormant in human beings isolated from social intercourse through conversation.

Also significant is Hume’s contention that even strong personal sentiments will usually come to heel when confronted with societal norms. Though they may be stronger than are our more general social sentiments, they are inevitably private and particular. Yet Hume maintained that even these sentiments are generally overpowered by our own internal desire to conform to the general mores of the society around us. Hume contended that even in the face of these strong and personal sentiments, our ‘own breasts’ dictate that the societal and public sentiments should hold sway. In this case, the individual is portrayed on the one hand as falling under the influence of his personal sentiments, yet on the other as drawing on the internalised societal sentiments, which is the ultimate basis for repressing the former. It is the internalisation of the societal sentiments to such a degree that they generally trump our other more innate sentiments that Hume saw as the end result of engaging in social discourse.

This is perhaps why Hume was so keen to stress, in the main body of his work, that with regard to the vast majority of sentiments, the communal standards enshrined in linguistic conventions command our public selves. In line with this, Hume noted, “[A]nd though the heart takes not part entirely with those general notions, nor regulates all its love and hatred by the universal abstract differences of vice and virtue, without regard to self, or the persons with whom we are more intimately connected; yet have these moral differences a considerable influence, and being sufficient, at least for discourse, serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre and in the schools”.⁹⁴ Therefore, while we may not be

generally.

⁹³ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 150.

⁹⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 116.

capable of completely subjugating our private sentiments, in the public realm we must submit to the standards of the society at large. In every aspect of our common life, we are forced to engage in a discourse with assumed standards and expectations. It is this standard which we must work toward refining and developing through our daily involvement in the society around us.

Though the dominance of the societal over the personal is seen as crucial in Hume's characterisation of morals, as the above quote demonstrates, Hume always allowed room for some degree of individual variation. He pointed out in a footnote that it is natural that private connections to our fellow man should usually prevail over our more general connection to society at large, otherwise "our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost". Yet still, we know even in such situations that it is often necessary to "correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue, founded chiefly on general usefulness."⁹⁵ Hume recognised here not only our own human failings in following conventional moral rules, but also the fact that the occasional indulgence in prejudicial sentiments is a positive thing. By giving into these feelings, we nurture not only our most personal sentiments such as love and approbation, but also keep alive the primal sentimental instincts upon which the social virtues are constructed. These sentiments are naturally closer to us, and their small universal affect, which has great impact on our own lives, are thus viewed as preferential to the general moral rules by which we usually abide. Nevertheless, Hume cautions us not to become caught up in them, but to maintain the prudence of following the more public standards of virtue at times when these more immediate ones do not hold such sway.

At a more general level, however, this ability to opt out of the general moral standards can be seen as assuring the dynamic nature necessary for moral judgments, accounts for the idea of universal standards, while also making concessions for the individual's free will. Since the moral universe is tied to the society, it is, by necessary implication, not a fixed or static set of standards.

⁹⁵ Hume, *Enquiry*, f.n. 25, p. 116.

Although one must tap into this core to partake in any meaningful moral evaluation, this action does not necessarily prevent the forming of differences of opinion and changing interpretations. If a true moral judgement is to be made, there must be some degree of individual choice, no matter how slight. By tying morality to the shared core of beliefs as evidenced in linguistic convention, Hume left some breathing room for individual variations in interpretation. This employment of repeated allusions to language in examining the realm of morals not only help explained the dynamic nature of moral standards within a society over time but also crucially preserved the necessity of the use of free will in moral interpretation.

6. Potential Pitfalls of Linguistic Convention in Relation to Morals: *Appendix IV: Of Some Verbal Disputes*

Though the inclusion of language in his discourse facilitated Hume's efforts to illustrate and substantiate the formation of a moral sense, it also brought with it some inherent difficulties. As noted in the introductory chapter, the attempt to tie the sentiments to language was complicated by some problems inherent in the medium of language itself. These quandaries were addressed by Hume in Appendix IV of the *Enquiry*, a tract entitled: *Of Some Verbal Disputes*. It is here that Hume distanced himself from the likes of the Port Royal rationalist grammarians, and pointed out the necessity of theorising about language's relation to morals in a much more conventionalist manner, thus highlighting Hume's apparent effort to address the role and character of language in relation to morals. It also represents, as we will see in Chapter VI, a tract that Thomas Reid would take great issue.

Early in this piece Hume noted that "[N]othing is more usual than for philosophers to encroach upon the province of grammarians; and to engage in disputes of words, while they imagine that they are handling controversies of the deepest importance and concern. It was in order to avoid altercations, so frivolous and endless, that I endeavoured to state with the utmost caution the object of the

present enquiry”.⁹⁶ Due to this fact, Hume was hesitant to create catalogue of standards which attempted to apply the term virtue and vice to characteristics of man because “some of those qualities, which I [Hume] classed among the objects of praise, receive, in the English language, the appellation of *talents*, rather than of virtues; some of the blamable or censurable qualities are often called *defects*, rather than vices”.⁹⁷ Hume was also eager to remind the reader that the *Enquiry* was neither an attempt to draw exact lines between virtue and vice nor an attempt to explain the reasons and exact origin of such distinctions in relation to any particular words. Hume stated, “is there any reason for being so extremely scrupulous about a *word*, or disputing whether they be entitled to the denomination of virtues?”⁹⁸ For this effort would, “prove only a grammatical enquiry,”⁹⁹ something he clearly did not see himself engaging in, nor did he consider such an effort useful.

Hume then proceeded to explain why he believes that such an undertaking was unnecessary. First, he pointed out that in no language are the distinctions between virtue and vice clearly drawn. Hume described how it is impossible to find one fixed category of virtue and vice without necessarily excluding other qualities which, given the right circumstances and perspective, are also worthy of that claim. For example, if we say that virtue is in reality social virtue, in that the characteristics of virtue aid society, by the very name ‘social virtue’, we imply that there are other virtues outside this category. If, on the other hand, we make a distinction between ‘the heart and the head’, giving more credit to the former due to the fact that ‘genuine virtue’ is moved more immediately, we instantly conflict with the worthiness of industry, frugality, temperance, etc., which are seen as virtues, but do not move us immediately. With regard to such distinctions, Hume stated that, “the question, being merely verbal, cannot possibly be of any importance. A moral, philosophical discourse needs not enter into all the caprices of language,

⁹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 176.

⁹⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 176.

⁹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 179.

⁹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 176.

which are so variable in different dialects, and in different principles”.¹⁰⁰ This statement should not be taken as some sort of caveat in relation to the centrality of linguistic convention in his discussion of morality. Rather, Hume seems to caution that we should avoid becoming pedantic by attempting to draw strict distinctions when it comes to virtue, nor should such distinctions be used to discredit a theory of morals which lacks conformity with such rigid grammatical standards.

What Hume appeared to advocate on this front was an abandonment of an attempt to categorise in a strict fashion what was, or was not, a virtue. Rejecting Locke’s epistemological conclusion that moral standards could and should be strictly categorised, Hume stated that, “the ancient moralists, the best models, made no material distinction among the different species of mental endowments and defects, but treated all alike under the appellation of virtue and vices, and made them indiscriminately the object of their moral reasonings”.¹⁰¹ This statement reflects Hume’s concern with avoiding the pedagogic approach to morals, and stresses the need to tap into the general attributes of our sentimental constitution. The key is to focus on the general character of those things we deem virtuous. In this way “even the moderns, where they speak naturally, hold the same language with the ancients”.¹⁰² This ‘language’ does not revolve around the minutia of distinctions and categorisations, but rather around tapping into the general and universal moral sentiments found in all men in all ages.

Hume then pointed out that the reason modern philosophers so often do not agree with the ancients is mainly due to the negative influence of theology. Theology, by gaining a stranglehold in ethics, has impacted on the interpretation of virtue as it “bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose, without much regard to the phenomena of nature”.¹⁰³ As a result of this, “reasoning, and *even language*, have been warped from their natural course, and distinctions have been

¹⁰⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 177.

¹⁰¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 180.

¹⁰² Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 182.

¹⁰³ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 183.

endeavoured to be established where the difference of objects was, in a manner, imperceptible" (emphasis added).¹⁰⁴ It was Hume's contention, that the goals of his efforts as a natural philosopher were to correct this imbalance and to return to the more rudimentary precepts of virtue which were accurately understood by the ancients.¹⁰⁵

Hume next addressed what he saw as a more serious problem with the character of language, namely, the fact that language seems incapable in the end of ever capturing completely the subtleties of the sentiments that man wishes to convey. As with Locke, this inherent flaw in language use presented great difficulties to Hume. We should also note at this time, that it is on the crucial point of language ambiguity that Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments began to founder as well. Hume addressed this problem quite directly by noting that, "it is no wonder that language should not be very precise in marking the boundaries between virtues and talents, vices and defects, since there is so little distinction in our internal estimation of them".¹⁰⁶

It is the difficulty in actually expressing the nuance and transient nature of our sentiments that was seen by the Scots as presenting one of the most formidable problems faced by those attempting to draw a correlation between language and the expression of our internal sentiments. It is the ability to correlate the cognitive processing of moral sentiments with the reality of a functional moral system within a finite number of signifying categories that could be recognised by other individuals handicapped by the same obstacle. Hume was obviously aware of the problems that arose in this area, and also seemed to be at a loss to explain how our whole range of sentiments could ever be expressed in language. For example, in reviewing our internal sentiment of 'conscious worth', Hume stated, "this sentiment, which, though most common of all others, has no proper name in our

¹⁰⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted at this point that Thomas Reid, who will be addressed in the closing chapters of this thesis, took great umbrage at these assertions by Hume and devoted a considerable effort to prove that it is Hume's approach to natural philosophy which twists and manipulates language out of its natural course.

language”.¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to note, however that, in regard to this particular sentiment, its very nature does not permit it to enter into, or become expressed by, the linguistic conventions of the society. The form of reflection depicted here by Hume is internal. For example, Hume noted that acts of foolishness, “[s]till haunt his solitary hours, damp his most aspiring thoughts, and show him, even to himself, in the most contemptible and most odious colours imaginable”.¹⁰⁸ Because this sentiment never has the opportunity of entering into the public forum, and thus having its character explained by the examination of linguistic convention, it seems to be significant that such feelings are so difficult to translate into words. They are not intended to be conveyed to others, but rather are internalised. As a result, we do not have a felt need or desire to communicate them to others. Due to this fact, they have never entered into the public domain, and thus elude attempts to categorise them in that forum.

More generally, this point about the failings of language to express all the nuances of the internal sentiments to the outside world is also significant. Based on Hume’s examples in this section it would seem that, though the structure is there to be exploited in the effort to express sentiments, the individual has no option but to utilise the system as it stands in order to form and express his sentiments. Ultimately, Hume acknowledged the fact that the system cannot adequately provide for the expression of all the nuances and all of the sentiments one may feel.

Hume went to some lengths to point out that, though there may be a pool of moral understanding from which communal moral standards are drawn, the manifestation and necessary categorisation of these sentiments will necessarily appear at times to be rigid and unaccommodating. As we noted in the case of the general linguistic climate of the period, Hume’s linguistic link with morals left open the idea of conflict and, ultimately, allows the individual to opt out of the societal norm. Hume maintained that the individual takes the passion he feels into

¹⁰⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 177.

the marketplace of linguistic usage and this necessarily implies that the object to be judged by the communal standard need not necessarily always, or accurately, correspond with the general moral climate as embodied in linguistic usage. Rather, it is an easily accessible tool by which to judge these standards. Though one can refine the mastery of the general social mores through observation and education, ultimately there always must be the possibility, however refined, that our personal sentiments will not be able to be expressed.

But does this observation conflict with the general conclusions thus far drawn between linguistic convention and Hume's utilisation of it to substantiate how man forms moral standards? This apparent conflict might be reconciled by drawing a distinction between sentiments and moral judgements. As described above, sentiments are portrayed as unable to enter into the communal realm. They are kept at the status of mere sentiments due to the fact that they are not neutral, but prejudiced and individualistic. In order to rise to the level of moral judgements, they would necessarily have to become neutral and unprejudiced. For this to occur, though, given Hume's methodology, these sentiments would of necessity have to enter into the communal realm of discourse, and their processing into general standards would be evidenced in linguistic convention. For it is this process which shapes our moral sense. Thus, though we may at times have sentiments that are in conflict with our moral sense, that moral sense is still entirely reliant on the moral system as evidenced in the linguistic conventions of the community.

7. *A Dialogue*: The Linguistic Convention of Morals in Action

The contention that the medium of linguistic convention was used to illustrate and substantiate Hume's claims about the nature of human morality is further strengthened if one looks at Hume's other works relating directly or indirectly to the exploration of human moral sentiment. No example is perhaps more noteworthy than that of Hume's *A Dialogue*, originally published with the first edition of the *Enquiry* in 1751. Hume apparently had been rethinking the revisions

of Book III for several years, but he wrote the bulk of the *Enquiry* between the summer of 1749 and late 1750. He published it in 1751 together with *A Dialogue*, which has always been published as if it were a final appendix to *Enquiry*. Language is portrayed in *A Dialogue* as being the medium by which morals can be mastered and integrated into one's own understanding. It also offers one of Hume's clearest portrayals of the human understanding of virtue as an artificial and socially constructed concept relative to time and place.

The *Dialogue* opens with a description by the author of the tale of his friend Palamedes' travels in a country called Fourli. In this fictitious land, "inhabitants have ways of thinking, in many things, particularly in morals, diametrically opposite to ours".¹⁰⁹ Having briefly set the scene, Hume immediately pointed out that an understanding of the moral character of these people rests upon gaining knowledge of their language. "When I came among them," states Palamedes, "I found that I must submit to double pains; first to learn the meaning of the terms in their language, and then to know the import of those terms, and the praise and blame attached to them".¹¹⁰ Thus, the first step in understanding a given moral system was portrayed by Hume as the need to gain an understanding of the medium by which that moral system is transmitted within the society. Due to this fact, an individual must first learn the signifiers used within a society; and second, must be able to attach socially specific meanings to that verbiage. The knowledge of language is therefore depicted as essential for any understanding of morality itself.

Significantly, the above quotation also implies that knowledge of the language, *per se*, is but the first step. It is also necessary to put that language in line with the linguistic conventions enshrined in that society. Therefore, the culturally determined moral context is crucial to this latter step. For example, merely knowing the words for 'bravery' or 'cowardice' in a foreign tongue is not enough; one must also necessarily come to understand in what context those terms are

¹⁰⁹ David Hume, *A Dialogue*, in Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 185.

¹¹⁰ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 185.

attributed to a given action. Only then does one come to know the parameters within which these terms can be applied and have validity. The non-native speaker must learn when and how these terms are applied, or else he or she cannot accurately connect them with a person or a deed. Until this is achieved, the ability to accurately understand the context of the word is impossible because the essential meaning which these words are intended to convey is not comprehended. Before one can engage individuals within that society, one must understand the standards by which they have been acculturated. Until such time, the correct selection of words cannot be accomplished, nor the associated ideas of virtue or vice understood, until the application of the terms specific to that society and their associated norms are mastered. For this to occur, the moral context embodied in linguistic convention must be fully comprehended.

As the *Dialogue* continues it becomes apparent that Palamedes' efforts on this front prove extremely frustrating. This is because he succeeded in the first step, namely, learning the meaning of the words in the Fourlian language, but failed to fulfil the second necessary step, learning the praise and blame associated with these specific words in that culture. He therefore comes to understand the words of the language, but does not experience the underlying sentiments that these words should otherwise arouse within this particular society. Without this second crucial element not only can he not truly communicate with those around him, for he lacks the knowledge as to which sentiments this particular moral language is attached, but since he lacks the necessarily internalisation of principles and dispositions of the society at large.

Palamedes, realising this, proceeds to actively engage the inhabitants of Fourli in conversation. "After a word had been explained to me, and the character, which it expressed, had been described," Palamedes would attempt to engage other inhabitants in conversation. Yet while the author attempted to understand the meaning and sentiments behind words, he found that at every turn his attempts to use these words in the correct context proved futile. What to him were vile epithets

were taken as estimable remarks, and what appears to be high praise, even when they are repeated word for word and when he thought he had “remembered and understood them perfectly”, were taken as mortal affronts.¹¹¹ What follows is a series of misunderstandings on the part of Palamedes, as he consistently misinterprets what are acts of virtue or vice within Fourli society.

In the end, Palamedes is quite perplexed by the seeming lack of correlation between the words others used and the moral approbation or disapprobation he would assume would have proceeded from that understanding. It would appear that either the signs Palamedes is using are simply being confused by the Fourlites, or that the signs are in some way universal, but that the underlying sentiments which Palamedes is attempting to express are in fact different. The question is then, which does Hume see as the correct characterisation of the situation?

It would stand to reason that if the language naturally touched our moral sentiment, then one would merely have to learn the unique string of letters used in that society to express that sentiment. Though the signs would vary and the vowels and consonants strung together to express those moral sentiments would be different from our own, once these words and the correct pronunciation were mastered, the universal moral connection would be made. Hume, however, does not maintain that this is all that is required. It is not simply a matter of learning the correct sign, for Hume portrayed Palamedes as having, “remembered and understood them perfectly”. Rather, the underlying sentiment itself is portrayed as being different. The moral character of a given act was portrayed as being differently understood in the strange and morally inverted universe Palamedes has entered. What is therefore being portrayed here by Hume is not simply a misunderstanding of the language, but rather of the moral universe which that language is used to map.

But, as with Hume’s portrayal of morals in his other works, he was quick to

¹¹¹ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 185.

dismiss the notion that custom is the sole basis of all moral determination. There are “universal, established principles of morals” it would seem, but they embody themselves in very distinct ways. Hume stated, “the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different”.¹¹² But what does this mean? Can the manifestation of these universal principles vary so dramatically as to bring about moral systems that are seemingly so contradictory as to be diametrically opposed?

To help answer these questions, the reader is introduced to a Fourlian named Alcheic, who, in the end, is portrayed as “incestuous, a parricide, an assassin, ungrateful, perjured traitor, and something else too abominable to be named [a homosexual]”.¹¹³ Yet within Fourli society he is held in the highest esteem. Palamedes is understandably confused by this reaction. Though daunted by these discrepancies; Palamedes still is driven to explore why this apparent conflict exists.

In order to do this, Palamedes attempts to adopt the sentiments of those around him, so as to gain an understanding of the Florlian’s ideas of virtue and vice. Confronted with the news that his new associate Alcheic is guilty of what seems to be the unjustified murder of his friend Usbek, Palamedes still “pretended to join in the *general voice* of acclamation, and only asked, by way of curiosity, *as a stranger*, which of all his noble actions was most highly applauded; and soon found that all sentiments were united in giving preference to the assassination of Usbek [emphasis added]”.¹¹⁴ Here we see the point raised both in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry* regarding the way linguistic convention comes to reflect what is considered virtuous within a society. Those who were a part of the Fourli society had adopted those linguistic conventions, and all that the mastery of such linguistic conventions entail, and were thus united in voice and sentiment in regard to these actions. Palamedes, however, stood outside of these conventions, and thus felt himself isolated as a stranger from the sentiments being expressed. It is also

¹¹² Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 193

¹¹³ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 189.

¹¹⁴ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 186.

interesting to note here that Hume, once again, pointed out the desire to conform even when one's sentiments are in such discord in relation to the mass of society. The felt need of Palamedes to feign that his sentiments matched those which seemed to be universally voiced by those around him is very interesting. This felt need of acceptance illustrates the powerful influence that social mores, enshrined in linguistic convention, have in shaping those who do not otherwise conform to these standards.

As Palamedes continues to struggle to understand the principles by which virtue and vice are being applied in this strange land, Hume once again refers to Palamedes' attempt to understand and utilise the "general voice of the people,"¹¹⁵ in his attempt to understand how virtue and vice are being used within Fourli society. It is this general voice that is his only means by which to gain understanding, and it is this voice that ultimately dictates what is perceived in Fourli as virtue or vice. By a continual analysis of the morals in action via the linguistic convention of its inhabitants, Palamedes is seen as slowly but surely coming to an understanding, however alien, of the moral system by which this other society abides.

Hume admitted in the closing paragraph of the *Dialogue* that in the end one is free to strike out on one's own moral course and "depart from the maxims of common reason".¹¹⁶ This is possible, but it comes at a cost, for they are "in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity".¹¹⁷ It is the same decision as one can make in adopting a private language as articulated by Locke. It is possible, but to do so cuts one off from the main goal behind the use of language in the first place, the regulation and dissemination of the sentiments, morality, and sociability.

This is not to assume, however, that Palamedes is able ultimately to understand

¹¹⁵ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 187.

¹¹⁶ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 199.

¹¹⁷ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 199.

these sentiments or that he joins in the 'voice of the people'. The reason for this, however, is not simply because the actions outlined as taking place among the Fourlites were a display of "[s]uch barbarous and savage manners" that they "are not only incompatible with a civilized, intelligent people ... but scarcely compatible with human nature".¹¹⁸ For Hume revealed that he had adopted the story of the land of Fourli from the classic writer Xenophon. In reality, the seemingly alien and repugnant sentiments encountered by Palamedes on his journey was in fact the moral system adhered to in ancient Greece and the actions of Alcheic mirror those of "an Athenian man of merit".¹¹⁹ Why then, are the actions of the Greeks universally admired, yet these very same actions as mirrored in the mores of Fourli universally deplored? How can this paradox be explained?

Hume attempted to answer this question through a dialogue between Palamedes and the author. While "fashion, vogue, custom, and law, [are] the chief foundations of all moral determinations,"¹²⁰ these factors vary dramatically between societies and over time. Because of this, though the morals of ancient Greece would seem perverse to the modern eye, modern morals would be considered as indicative of an 'inferior, servile species' by the ancient Greeks.¹²¹ Clearly, the manifestation of what exactly is or is not to be considered a virtuous act was portrayed by Hume as being culturally relative.

What is not culturally relative, however, is the wellspring of the sentiments themselves. Taking the analysis "a little higher, and examining first principles," Hume presents the following analogy: "The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the *same* principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the differences of their courses".¹²² Here Hume portrayed those things that are held to be universally virtuous as tapping into

¹¹⁸ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 188

¹¹⁹ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 188.

¹²⁰ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 191.

¹²¹ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 190.

the innate sentiments from which every variation, in the form of distinct moral systems, arises. It is this innate predisposition to distinguish between virtue and vice which is channelled by the societal institutions which create variations. As Hume stated, “the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same; though the conclusions which they draw are often very different”.¹²³ Thus, while Hume seemed willing to admit to an underlying universal sense of virtue and vice, he rejected Shaftesbury’s contention that these necessarily manifest themselves in the same way in all societies and in all times.

It is this innate wellspring which is drawn upon when an individual is able to recognise that there are such things as virtue and vice, but not how they will manifest themselves within a given society. Virtue and moral excellence are ultimately determined, according to Hume in the *Dialogue*, by the characteristic action “being *useful*, or *agreeable* to a man *himself*, or to *others*. For what other reason can ever be assigned for praise or approbation? Or where would be the sense in extolling a *good* character or action, which, at the same time, is allowed to be *good for nothing*? All the differences, therefore, in morals, may be reduced to this one general foundation, and may be accounted for by the different views, which people take of these circumstances”.¹²⁴ The differences in how this ‘good’ embodies itself in a given society vary because, “[S]ometimes men differ in their judgment about the usefulness of any habit or action: Sometimes also the peculiar circumstances of things render one moral quality more useful than others, and give it a peculiar preference”.¹²⁵ Therefore, from this appeal to utility arise the reasons for the distinct, and sometimes conflicting, conceptions of virtue and vice of different societies over the ages.

Though they may be altered by cultural determinations of utility, original principles of censure or blame were still stressed by Hume at this point in the

¹²² Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 192.

¹²³ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 193.

¹²⁴ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 194.

¹²⁵ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 194.

Dialogue as being uniform and universal throughout the course of human history. While over this time “many changes have arrived in religion, language, laws, and custom; none of these revolutions has ever produced any considerable innovation in the primary sentiments of morals, more than in those of external beauty”.¹²⁶ By listing the artificial social constructs which are at the centre of Hume’s discussion of the formation of virtue within society, this statement should not be taken to imply that moral sentiments are somehow beyond the realm of these constructs. Rather, Hume merely reiterated here that the vague and innate notion of ‘the good’ exists beyond the particulars of such specific social constructs. He did not seem to dismiss the fact that these artificial constructs are the channels by which the fundamental distinctions between virtue and vice enter into social standards. As with Hume’s effort to relate morality to beauty, as we shall see later in our section on taste, he was simply attempting to assert that the spectrum of actions deemed as either good or bad is part and parcel of the nature of the sentiments, and that the characterisation of these innate sentiments are determined by society. Once again, at the end of the *Dialogue*, Hume stressed the central import of morality as a social construct and the primacy of its ability to shape the individual’s moral sense.

Hume also seemed to assert that there was no conflict between these innate principles and those of the social constructs of a given system. Be it ancient Greece or Eighteenth Century Scotland, the universal character of these intrinsic perceptions of virtue and vice evidenced in all societies necessarily incorporate an appreciation of such discernment into their system of morals. This explains why we can view alien and distant actions as ultimately virtuous. All moral systems incorporate at their base these same fundamental principles. Though they may manifest themselves in an odd or contradictory way, the reason behind the particular form, the search for the good, bridges these cultural gaps. In turn, each culture will enshrine the same virtues at an abstract level, and thus will encourage such a connection to be made. This is why it was clear to Hume that regardless of the particular society, and the superficial differences in the actual language spoken,

¹²⁶ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 194.

even the most foreign of cultures are still immediately comprehensible at the more fundamental level of emotions, purposes, and inclination.¹²⁷

In the conclusion to *A Dialogue*, Hume summarised the basic premises laid out during the course of his discussion. Hume re-emphasised his contention that while the concept of ‘the good’ was universal and uniform, “erroneous conclusions” in regard to it, “can be corrected by sounder reasoning and larger experience”.¹²⁸ Hume warned that we cannot place too much faith in our instincts on this manner for “the precise point, where we are to stop, can scarcely be determined by natural reason; and is therefore a very proper subject for municipal law or custom”.¹²⁹ This reliance is not to be feared, however, for while “the customs of nations incline too much, sometimes to the one side, sometimes to the other,” the aims of all moral systems are basically to do good. Thus, “[E]xperience and the practice of the world readily correct any extravagance on either side”.¹³⁰ The individual who capitulates to the “maxims of common life and ordinary conduct” can safely assume that he or she is more or less ultimately in line with, and will follow the moral dictates of, the universal sentiments of all mankind in relation to virtue and vice.¹³¹ This return to the individual’s reliance on the societal standards around them brings us back yet again to the primary role of linguistic convention in shaping these opinions.

6. *Of the Standard of Taste*: The Relationship Between the Development of Taste, Morality and Linguistic Convention

Of the Standard of Taste first appeared as part of *Four Dissertations* published in 1757. Having briefly drawn a correlation between morals and taste in *A Dialogue*, Hume used *On the Standard of Taste* to further expand his discussion of this relationship. Hume’s description of how one comes to develop a reliable standard of taste parallels, to a remarkable degree, his basic assumptions in regard to the

¹²⁷ See, Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*, (London: Viking Press, 1996) p. 6.

¹²⁸ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 193.

¹²⁹ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 192.

¹³⁰ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 197.

¹³¹ Hume, *A Dialogue*, p. 197.

regulation of the moral sense. Once again we find that the role of linguistic convention plays a commanding role in shaping our sentiments in regard to taste. It is in this essay that Hume most clearly presented his assertion that language was used as a communicative sign-posting mechanism for transmitting moral approbation or disapprobation.

As was the case in the *Dialogue*, Hume began *On the Standard of Taste* by immediately presenting language as a means of illuminating the nature of human judgement. Building on the nature of linguistic convention, Hume stated, “[T]here are certain terms in every language, which import blame, and others praise; and all men who use the same tongue, must agree in their application of them. Every voice is united in applauding elegance, propriety, simplicity, spirit in writing; and in blaming fustian, affectation, coldness, and a false brilliancy”.¹³² Here, Hume lays bare his assumptions relating to the usefulness of referencing language and language use to support his theory of morals. The determination of approval or disapproval that we make as members of society speaking the same language guides us naturally toward a conception of virtue and vice. Significantly, there is an implicit assumption agreed upon by the speakers of the language that all will apply these words in like manner. Society is, therefore, united in its characterisation of certain acts as worthy and others as wicked. In order to participate in the language, this implicit agreement must be made, and the corresponding uniformity of response must necessarily follow. A problem arises, however, “when critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes; and it is found, that they had affixed a very different meaning to their expression....An explanation of the terms commonly ends the controversy; and the disputants are surprised to find, that they had been quarrelling, while at the bottom they agreed in their judgment”. Hume continued, “[T]hose who found morality on sentiment, more than on reason, are inclined to comprehend ethics under the former observation, and to maintain, that, in all questions which regard conduct and

¹³² David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, in Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *Hume's Ethical Writings* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) p. 275.

manners, the difference among men is really greater than at first sight it appears".¹³³ This is particularly true for those who argue morality from the basis of the sentiments, a perspective from which Hume by this point in his career seems to have distanced himself.

As discussed in the *Dialogue*, Hume pointed out the basic agreement relating to the fundamental precepts held as virtuous in all ages. He maintained this is due partly to the influence of 'plain reason' which dictates that there are similar sentiments in all men. Hume went on to stress, however, that "[S]o far as the unanimity is real, this account may be admitted as satisfactory: But we must also allow that some part of the seeming harmony in morals may be accounted for by the very nature of language. The word *virtue*, with its equivalent in every tongue, implies praise; as that of *vice* does blame: And no one, without the most obvious and grossest impropriety, could affix reproach to a term, which in general acceptation is understood in a good sense; or bestow applause, where the idiom requires disapprobation".¹³⁴ The 'idiom', as Hume termed it, is clearly a linguistic convention in this context. Within the language itself are enshrined the basic precepts of virtue and vice, and the correlating actions which warrant their application. Upon these fundamental building blocks of 'general precepts', the language itself constructs these categories and dictates by 'general acceptance' what is or is not virtuous.

The reality of this situation led Hume to conclude that there was very little point in trying to determine general and absolute principles of morality. This was due to the simple fact that, "[W]hoever recommends any moral virtues, really does no more than is implied in the terms themselves. That people, who invented the word *charity*, and used it in a good sense, inculcated more clearly and much more efficaciously, the precept, be *charitable*, than any pretended legislator or prophet, who should insert such a *maxim* in his writings. Of all expressions, those, which,

¹³³ Hume, *Taste*, p. 276.

¹³⁴ Hume, *Taste*, p. 276.

together with their other meaning, imply a degree either of blame or approbation, or the least liable to be perverted or mistaken".¹³⁵ Hume suggested here that the initial establishment of the word, along with its correlated significance in relation to virtue or vice, arise out of the utility it offers user. Enshrining a sentiment in a word implicitly assumes acceptance by other language users of its necessity, usefulness, and validity. In order for this to occur, the word must somehow create a utilitarian link between sentiments and social context. With the enshrining of the word within the linguistic conventions of the society, the particular sentimental response which that word represents becomes more or less fixed, and only open to a degree of manipulation afterwards. This is due to the fact that the foundation of these words, having tapped into our base sentiments of praise and blame, are so profound as to make them less likely to be altered.

This linguistic convention does not, however, lead to uniformity across cultures and time in relation to these general precepts upon which they are built. In fact, it is the adoption of linguistic conventions themselves which results in the great disparity witnessed between individual societies with regard to morals. Hume stated that, "it is to be supposed, that the ARABIC words, which correspond to the ENGLISH, equity, justice, temperance, meekness, charity, were such as, from the constant use of that tongue, must always be taken in a good sense; and it would have argued the greatest ignorance, not of morals, but of language, to have mentioned them with any epithets, besides those of applause and approbation".¹³⁶ Here Hume appeared to acknowledge the centrality of linguistic convention in relation to characterisation of morals. This comes to light through the fact that Hume implied that the deeds deemed virtuous in Arab society are, upon closer inspection, acts of "treachery, inhumanity, cruelty, revenge, bigotry," and thus, "utterly incompatible with civilized society".¹³⁷ The approval for these actions are based on the simple fact that, "every action is blamed or praised, so far only as it is

¹³⁵ Hume, Taste, p. 277.

¹³⁶ Hume, Taste, p. 277.

¹³⁷ Hume, Taste, p. 277.

beneficial or hurtful to the true believers”.¹³⁸ The utility of the acts to which approbation or blame are attached is socially relative. It is due to this fact that the conceptions of the society as embodied in linguistic convention come to play a significant role in how morality is characterised within a given society.

Hume then proceeded to apply the type of analysis to the establishment of ‘rules’ of taste. While direct linguistic references become fleeting from this point out, the general outline of his theory on the refinement of our taste parallels those associated with morality. For example, though the principles of taste are portrayed as universal, it does not follow that all men have good taste. This is due to the fact that their internal sensations do not give them general guidelines on how to make judgement with regard to matters of taste. This is further compounded by the fact that all men must struggle to overcome their own prejudice, which tends to pervert their natural sentiments.

Moreover, as with the case of morals, Hume warned against one of the great stumbling blocks in the transmission of universal innate sensations, for “[t]he organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles”.¹³⁹ The ability to translate our internal sentiments into a publicly accessible, and acceptable, expression of those sentiments is extremely difficult. Adapting the rules of taste to the nuance shades of judgment in regards to our internal affection is likewise perplexing. These initial influences must remain to some degree unsatisfied and isolated in order for one to partake in the communal exchange of discerning taste.

To accomplish this, one must attempt to adopt a neutral perspective, aided by experience and observation. This ability allows the individual to draw comparisons between objects in order to determine their excellence and degree of proportion.

¹³⁸ Hume, *Taste*, p. 277.

¹³⁹ Hume, *Taste*, p. 288.

“By comparison alone,” stated Hume, “we fix the epithets of praise or blame, and learn how to assign the due degree of each”.¹⁴⁰ One must also take into consideration the varying views and prejudices of different ages and customs, rather than rashly condemn them based on the manners of one’s own age and country. Likewise, when addressing a particular audience, an orator must “have a regard to their particular genius, interests, opinions, passions, and prejudices; otherwise he hopes in vain to govern their resolutions, and inflame their affections”.¹⁴¹ Upon reaching this state, one has in essence mastered the ‘language’ of taste, having gone through very much the same process as outlined by Hume in the acquiring of ideas of morality through linguistic convention. If this is achieved, then “[a] great inferiority of beauty gives pain to a person *conversant* in the highest excellence of the kind, and is for that reason pronounced a deformity” [emphasis added].¹⁴²

Once again, we see in the area of taste the incorporation of language into Hume’s analysis. Linguistic conventions are not merely used as an object of analogy by Hume, but as a means of explaining how ‘in common life’ language actually affects the process by which an individual’s sentiments are shaped within a communal context. Characterised in the same manner as morals, language is seen as crucial to the formation of the rules of taste both in an individual and a communal context.

From Hume’s commentary on the nature of taste, as well as in the other areas of inquiry discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear that the demonstration of his moral theory by reference to language is interwoven into his analysis throughout his work. Hume appeared to have come to the conclusion that man, if he was to successfully function in the social world he was born into, can only do so with the help of language. Language offers a common medium of exchange, communal standards of uniformity, explanations for moral differences between societies, the

¹⁴⁰ Hume, *Taste*, pp. 285 - 286.

¹⁴¹ Hume, *Taste*, p. 286.

¹⁴² Hume, *Taste*, p. 286.

necessary flexibility to accommodate moral adaptation, and yet a level of ambiguity that assures a realm of free will. As a result, Hume ultimately portrays linguistic convention as the means and the medium of all social interactions, and as such, plays a crucial role in his characterisation of man's moral understanding.

CHAPTER IV

Adam Smith and the Centrality of Language in his Characterisation of Moral Sentiments

Having examined Hume's references to linguistic convention in his effort to illustrate and substantiate his theory of morals, we now turn our attention to the utilisation of references to language and language use in the moral theory of Adam Smith. That Smith was keenly interested in the developments taking place in the Enlightenment's growing interest in language and language use should not come as a surprise. His first published piece, in fact, was on a semantic subject.¹ He was also active in Edinburgh's 'Select Society for Promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English Language in Scotland', where theorising on language found an interested public.² In his professional life, Smith not only lectured on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres throughout his career, but also dealt with language use in many of his published works. Given the extent of his dealings with language and language use, it should come as no surprise to discover that Smith's interest in language came to colour his theoretical reasoning.

As was true with Hume, a close inspection reveals Smith's consistent references to language in Smith's discussion of moral sentiments. The manifestation of the relationship between sociability, morality and language is, however, dramatically different from that which we witnessed in Hume. Whereas Hume viewed language as reflecting the moral universe of a given society in the form of linguistic convention, Smith was much more dubious about language's ability to take on such a role. This change in emphasis resulted in the marginalisation of Hume's social

¹ For the first issue of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755, Smith reviewed Johnson's *Dictionary* and focused his analysis on the semantic distinction and arrangement of words. See, Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, J.C. Bryce (ed.), (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985) p. 23.

² Lieve Jooen, 'Lord Monboddo and Adam Smith on the Origin and Progress of Language', *Bibliothèque des cahiers de l'institut de linguistique de Lovain* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peters, 1994) p. 264.

utility model, and required Smith to construct an ethical model in which man's morality was not simply able to be understood through references to its manifestation in linguistic convention. This is not to say that, for Smith, societal norms as mediated through the medium of language were excluded from playing an important role in the formation of moral sentiments. Rather, Smith envisioned the pool of moral sentiments embodied in existing language as illustrative models of individual moral consciousness.

What emerges from Smith's theory is a moral theory that looks to societal norms as guiding principles, but which ultimately rests on individual moral autonomy as enshrined in the 'impartial spectator'. Distancing himself from the social utility model as reflected in linguistic convention proffered by Hume, Smith presents a theory which deems the judgement of the 'impartial spectator' to be a reflection of more than simple social utility and human convention. It is this attempt by Smith to find a private, rather than social convention dependent, capacity for the formation of moral sentiments that comes to play a central role in his moral theory.

The question addressed in this chapter is whether, given this divergence in their theories, the distinctions made within Smith's characterisation of language and language use inevitably lead him to a different conclusion than Hume in relation to the correct characterisation of moral sentiments.³ While it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish such a direct causal relationship, particularly when it comes to the enigmatic theories of the Enlightenment, it does appear to be fair to argue that Smith's characterisation of language and, in particular, language's inherent limitations, played a notable role in shaping the parameters of his conclusions regarding the nature of the formation of moral sentiments. As with Hume, Smith's theory presents a conception of morality in which the formation of moral

³ The evidence points to the conclusion that Smith had read Hume's *Treatise* while at Oxford. As Nicholas Phillipson points out, the *Treatise* was published in 1739 and 1740 while he was still at Glasgow or had read it at least by the time he prepared his lectures on rhetoric and belle lettres in 1746 - 1747. (Cited from draft of "Language, Sociability and History: Some Reflections on the foundation of Adam Smith's Science

sentiments and language are linked, with the characterisation of the latter being used to illustrate and substantiate the conclusions about the former.

This disparate characterisation of the role of language and language use is due in large part to the emphasis Smith's moral theory places on the need for each individual to acquire the skills necessary to manipulate language in order to gain sympathy and, through this process, gain command over his or her own moral sentiments. Therefore, while still working firmly within the linguistic assumptions of the period, Smith shifted his characterisation of moral reasoning away from Hume's conception of a communal pool of moral understanding that is evidenced by linguistic conventions, and towards an understanding of morality that, while drawing on societal influences, stressed to a greater extent than Hume the affirmative efforts of the individual in mastering the moral sentiments.

1. Contemporary Developments in the Theory of Language: Condillac, Rousseau and the Origin of Language.

As noted earlier, some of the most distinguished scholars of the Enlightenment engaged in the study of language in an effort to unlock the secrets of human nature. The following section will explore the work of Etienne Bonnot De Condillac and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Publishing major tracts on language subsequent to those of Hume, these two theorists' discussions of the origin of language, its progress, and its impact on the development of human understanding, are known to have been read and highly regarded by Smith. It is therefore important to explore the premises and ramifications of Condillac and Rousseau's theories of language, paying particular attention to the implications of their theories in relation to social and moral theory.

Investigating the contemporary debate regarding the nature of language will allow us to gain some understanding of the general tenor of the discourse on language as Enlightenment progressed. It will also highlight the fact that most of

the period's theorists were extremely hesitant to take their observations on language into the realm of morals. As we will see, though the specific reasons for avoiding this were quite varied, all reflected a general concern that a theory of language could not adequately explain man's compulsion to act morally. By exploring the reasoning behind this trepidation, it is hoped that the difficult task taken on by the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, in particular Smith, to utilize references to language and language use can be better appreciated.

We will begin this process by first looking at the analysis of language proffered by Etienne Bonnot De Condillac. Condillac is arguably the most important figure in eighteenth-century linguistic study, both because of his own theoretical work and because of his extensive influence on other theorists of the period.⁴ He was concerned throughout his life with the problem of language and with human expression in general. An esteemed intellectual figure in Paris from 1750 until his death in 1780, Condillac wrote several pieces that dealt either directly or indirectly with the origin and development of language. While well known for his contributions to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, it is the publication of Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge) in 1746 that he presented the bulk of his theory on the origin of language.⁵ Although subtitled in French as, "a work in which all that concerns the human understanding is reduced to a single principle". The English translation had the subtitle "a supplement to Mr. Locke's Essay on the human understanding".⁶ This latter attribution is very apt, and no reader should fail to see Condillac's dependence on Locke, a relationship he often and fully acknowledged. In contrast to Descartes and the Port Royal, Condillac was an empiricist, maintaining that all

⁴ Franklin Phillip (ed. & trans.), *Philosophical Writings of Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 1982) p. 1; See also Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, p. 107.

⁵ Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1756, Facsimile Reproduction by Robert G. Weyant. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1971).

⁶ Ibid., See title page.

knowledge is derived from the senses and that thought, rather than being the main detriment in the organisation of knowledge, is in reality shaped by and dependent upon language.⁷

Condillac admired Locke, but he also believed that Locke's theory of language had not gone far enough. In concord with Locke, Condillac maintained that language was a gradual outgrowth of experience, even of "those sublime Thoughts, which tower above the Clouds, and reach as high as Heaven itself".⁸ However, according to Condillac language was not, as Locke was content to maintain, merely the necessary means of communication and an aid to memory. Rather, for Condillac, thinking could neither begin nor continue without it. He further maintained that, in all but its most primitive form, the connection of ideas depended on the use of signs. Thus, Condillac saw the progress of mind and knowledge as going hand-in-hand with the progress of language. The function of language is not merely to communicate thought, but to direct its steps. The two are mutually dependent.⁹ In order to substantiate this claim, Condillac first had to show how man, beginning as the passive object of changing sensations, could in time take control of his mental processes and become master of them.¹⁰ He claimed that man accomplished this by the invention of language.

As was the case with Mandeville, Condillac assumes that as long as man lived apart from mankind he "would have no occasion to connect his ideas with arbitrary signs".¹¹ While humans in the earliest stages of human history did occasionally come into contact with each other, these encounters were so brief that they did not allow for sufficient interaction to initiate the need for language.¹² In order to embark upon the discussion of what *did* spark the need for language, Condillac adopted and expanded upon the Mandevillian model of two children, one of each

⁷ Seuren, p. 78.

⁸ Condillac, p. 191.

⁹ Ellen McNiven Hine, *A Critical Study of Condillac's *Traité des systèmes** (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979) p. 186.

¹⁰ See, Knight, p. 152.

¹¹ Condillac, p. 129.

sex, lost in the desert after the deluge.¹³ Separated from society before they had learned to speak, these children, acting according to basic instincts, developed signs with which they could request and provide mutual help.¹⁴ It was his task then to reconstruct, on the basis of his conjectural history, the manner in which they would have formed a language.

Unlike Adam and Eve, who from the beginning were able to reflect and communicate their thoughts, these children had only the use of the elementary faculties of perception, awareness, attention, involuntary reminiscence and a very limited imagination, as long as they lived apart. They would, however, have an innate and instinctive capacity for expression. Like animals, man can, even after complete isolation, respond by way of spontaneous cries and movements to certain feelings such as fear, joy, pain, grief, etc..¹⁵ These natural cries, formed by man "as soon as he feels the passions to which they belong", were instinctive responses to immediate situations.¹⁶ They consisted of spontaneous expressions of momentary passions, rather than arising out of a desire to communicate feelings.

By living together, however, human beings were able to recognise the association between the spontaneous cry and the accompanying physical gesture, or 'natural signs'. This combination of cries and physical gestures, Condillac termed 'language of action'. For example, in an attempt to satisfy the pressing needs of his body, an individual would utter cries and move his head, arms, and other parts of his body. Another individual, sympathetic to his companion's suffering, would become anxious to relieve it, and would obey this impulse to the extent that he could.¹⁷ Man was thus seen to be moved to cry out by needs and passions that lie below the level of rationality. But the universality of those passions, the result of the single human nature shared by all men, gives such blind, inarticulate cries

¹² Ibid., p. 171.

¹³ This fiction, as with Mandeville, allowed Condillac to sidestep the theological problems involved in discussing the first origins of language.

¹⁴ Condillac, p. 133.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

meaning to other men. As Condillac noted, “perceiving some inward emotions which he was not yet able to account for, he suffered in seeing his companion suffer. From that very instant he felt himself inclined to relieve him, and he followed this impression to the utmost of his powers”.¹⁸ He argued that this common human nature, which provoked each man to recognise himself in all other men, was the source of mutual identification and sympathy, and that it was this spontaneous emotional response that was the pre-condition for making rational communication out of mere instinctive expression. Thus, each individual instinctively expressed the same feeling or responded to the same situation with the same cry or action.¹⁹ Condillac maintained that, “in the process of time he might use this sort of cries, to revive at pleasure the passions they express”.²⁰ By such repetition, early humans would in time gain the power of recall over a certain range of such gestures at will and would thus also be able to reproduce them as signs recognised others, and hence, be able to communicate.²¹

By becoming more familiar with these signs, men were more readily able to recall them at will. Thus, they gradually began to do deliberately what they had thus far had done only instinctively. First, through these signs they would come to recognise each other’s feelings. Then as they grew “more familiar with those signs, the more they were in a capacity of reviving them at pleasure”.²² Next, they began to use them intentionally in order to communicate feelings that they themselves were experiencing. At this critical juncture, these expressions are no longer considered by Condillac to be natural signs, but are rather termed ‘institutional signs’ which can be recalled at will.²³ The more men used these institutional signs, the more they exercised their mental faculties, which in turn, perfected the signs,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.172.

¹⁹ See, Knight, pp. 154 - 155.

²⁰ Condillac, pp. 52 - 54.

²¹ Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, p. 288.

²² Condillac, p. 173.

²³ Ibid., p. 53.

and made their use more familiar. Once this connection is established, the use of arbitrary signs and the capacity for reflection mutually played off each other and allowed man to gain ever-increasing levels of intellectual control.²⁴

Arbitrary or conventional signs were thus invented, as the need arose, by analogy with natural cries and gestures, which were instinctive.²⁵ It is ultimately through the use of this internalised stock of signs that all knowledge and its progress depends. For these innate natural signs open the way to the exercise of reflection, which results in the deliberate and productive control over thought and the materials of past experience through artificial language. Thus, by this process over a period of time, those initial “natural cries served them for a pattern, to frame a new language”.²⁶ From these admittedly small beginnings, the progress of language and knowledge is made possible.

As to the role of the passions after the initial stages of linguistic development, it is Condillac’s opinion that they still play an important part in language growth, in order to stimulate imagination, contemplation, and memory, one must first experience a sensation, he also envisioned situations in which a person experiences strong emotion were especially helpful in expanding that person’s range of speech and understanding.²⁷ Because of the strong feelings that the passions stir in us, we are given extra incentive to analyse and understand these feelings. For example, through the experience of such strong emotions as fear, delight, love, etc., the mind is compelled to understand these sensations and transform them into a more concrete form. In this sense, reflections on experiences regarding the passions continue to play an important role in linguistic development.

It is important to note, however, that Condillac was very much of the opinion that reflection on the passions is possible only after the fact, and not while they are

²⁴ Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, p. 287.

²⁵ Hine p. 186 - 187. See also Condillac at p. 57.

²⁶ Condillac, p. 174.

²⁷ Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, p. 287.

in the process of being experienced. For example he stated that, “[W]e cannot analyse enthusiasm when we feel it, because at that time we are not masters of our reflection”.²⁸ Therefore, the passions are understood only after the fact, through man’s reflection on the effects of the passion after it has passed. Condillac claimed this was due to the fact that “the passions throw us into violent agitations”, and “deprive us of the use of reflexion”.²⁹ Clearly, Condillac does not have great faith in man’s ability to communicate his passions in a controlled manner while still under their influence.

Condillac was also aware that, regardless of the number of signs created during this process, man would always have more perceptions than names that can designate them.³⁰ This is a particular problem when it comes to what Condillac regarded as terms that “relate to the different action of men”.³¹ The characterisations of these actions are too varied and vague to have fixed sign rules applied to their use. Instead, one can compile only general categories, what Condillac calls ‘Archetypes’, of ideas associated with such concepts as honour, courage, and virtue. The only other option, and one Condillac dismissed as unworkable, was an individualistic judgement which “would vary according as particular cases admitted of particular circumstances”.³²

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the next major contributor to the discussion and refinement of the linguistic premises being developed during the mid-eighteenth century. Rousseau’s discussion of language origin and development in *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality of Man, 1755), generally paralleled Condillac’s description of the origin of language. In fact, Rousseau began his discussion of language by acknowledging his indebtedness to Condillac.³³ Rousseau’s discussion of the origin of language

²⁸ Condillac, p. 98.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

³¹ Ibid., p. 106.

³² Ibid..

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, Franklin Philip (trans.)

commences with man in a state of nature and having only occasional and accidental associations with others. In keeping with Condillac, he postulated that those meetings that did occur were so fleeting that they never required the use of language.³⁴ While this explanation parallels that of Condillac, Rousseau rejected necessity as the mother of language, stressing that man was capable of fulfilling all his physical needs without the aid of any communication.

For Rousseau, as long as man remained in the state of nature, he could survive perfectly well with no other language than what Rousseau called 'cries of nature.' These cries were only used when a man found himself in danger, pain or in need of help: "The first language of mankind, the most universal and vivid, in a word the only language man needed, before he had occasion to exert his eloquence to persuade assembled multitudes, was the simple cry of nature. But as this was excited only by a sort of instinct on urgent occasions, to implore assistance in case of danger, or relief in case of suffering, it could be of little use in the ordinary course of life, in which more moderate feelings prevail".³⁵ As society developed and human interdependence increased, man's ideas became more numerous and more complex. Only then did cries and gestures multiply and develop into a more sophisticated form of language.³⁶

Thus, while arguing that in a state of nature man did not need language, Rousseau did recognise the presence of a universal connection that served as a springboard for linguistic development. In arguing against Hobbes' conception of man being innately self-centred, Rousseau maintained that "having been bestowed on mankind, to moderate, on certain occasions, the impetuosity of *amour-propre*,

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 64. The disagreements between Condillac and Rousseau revolved predominantly around whether man could create language without having the ability to reason already, and Rousseau's refusal to accept the notion of a spontaneous change from *language d'action* to spoken language. Some have theorised that Rousseau perhaps was simply disagreeing with Condillac solely for the sake of argument. See, Juliard, p. 48.

³⁴ Rousseau does speak of the formation of private languages, namely formed between children and their mother, but he feels that this was limited to those particular individuals and was lost after the child reached maturity.

³⁵ Rousseau, p. 66.

³⁶ Ibid.

or, before its birth, the desire of self-preservation, tempers the ardour with which he pursues his own welfare by an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer".³⁷ For Rousseau there was a universal sentiment, namely compassion, which all men felt and which came before any reflection. He argued that this instinctive reaction "puts us in the place of the sufferer, a feeling obscure yet lively in a savage, developed yet feeble in civilised man. ... Compassion must, in fact, be the stronger, the more the animal beholding any kind of distress identifies himself with the animal that suffers".³⁸

Rousseau went on to suggest that such passions were the true source of language; for love, hate, anger, joy, etc. could initially be expressed only in screams and groans.³⁹ Language thus arose out of man's desire to communicate; to relate these emotions and feelings to his companions and to describe his surroundings. Rousseau stated, "the progress of understanding has been exactly proportionate to the wants which the peoples had received from nature ... and in consequence to the passions that induce them to provide for those necessities".⁴⁰ He believed that this yearning, limited to the communication of inner feelings or emotions, was one of the first real desires experienced by man once he recognised other men as being similar to him. "It is by the activity of the passions," he states, "that our reason is improved; for we desire knowledge only because we wish to enjoy; and it is impossible to conceive any reason why a person who has neither fears nor desires should give himself the trouble of reasoning. The passions, again, originate in our wants, and their progress depends on that of our knowledge; for we cannot desire or fear anything, except from the idea we have of it, or from the simple impulse of nature".⁴¹ Thus man's first language was entirely the result of passions, for it was love, hate, anger, fear and the like that led man to speak.⁴²

³⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁹ Juliard, pp. 24 -25.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, p. 61.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Juliard p. 39.

Rousseau's 'natural language' was not unlike Condillac's 'language of action'. The former, however, was considered by Rousseau to be a more precise language than Condillac thought his to be.⁴³ Rousseau, in criticism of Condillac in the *Essay*, refused to accept the notion of a spontaneous change from 'language of action' to spoken language. Such a change could only have been made by a conscious common agreement among men, and would have been extremely difficult to achieve. Rousseau saw no need for a change. His natural language already consisted of words and gestures that simply continued to develop gradually. Despite this disagreement, the description Rousseau gave of the slow formation of language over time does not significantly differ from that of Condillac: the passage from the instinctive expression of the 'cries of nature' to the natural sign system of gestures and then on to the use of institutional signs.⁴⁴

Rousseau, however, was very explicit in his assertion that the refinement of language had hindered man in the communication of the passions. This was the result, in large part, of his faith in the advantages to man in the state of nature. "Now, it is plain," Rousseau stated, "that such identification must have been much more perfect in a state of nature than in a state of reason ... it is reason that turns man's mind back upon itself, and divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him".⁴⁵ He saw the unreflective state of man, before having the ability to communicate, as preferable to man in society after having the ability to communicate. For in this pre-social state, the inability to judge one's actions was taken as a positive state of affairs. While man in such a state could not express positive sentiments to others, he also did not have the ability to formulate and cultivate negative ones. "They maintained no kind of intercourse with one another," Rousseau posited, "and were consequently strangers to vanity, deference, esteem, and contempt; they had not the least idea of 'mine' and 'thine'".⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 32 - 33.

⁴⁴ Formigari, p. 163.

⁴⁵ Rousseau, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

In contrast to Mandeville and Condillac, Rousseau argued that, rather than creating social bonds, language had in reality “done little to make them sociable”.⁴⁷ Rousseau reached this conclusion because he started with a number of assumptions. First, he reasoned that one man, in a state of nature, did not stand in more or less need than another man and thus had “nothing to fear or to hope from any one”.⁴⁸ In contrast, man, “in society and endowed with speech,” is “subjected to universal dependence”.⁴⁹ Man in the latter case must rely on others to fulfil his needs, and becomes dependent on others. Rousseau further maintained that man’s character was weakened when subjected to such dependence.⁵⁰ Second, Rousseau assumed that man in a state of nature was ignorant of vice as well as of virtue, and has only his natural compassion to guide his actions. In contrast, man, armed with language, was capable of reflection. With reflection, Rousseau argued, comes self-awareness and as a result of this, self-love. This process “turns man’s mind back upon itself, and divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him”. This resulted in the deadening of an individual’s ability to put himself “in the place of the sufferer, a feeling obscure but lively in a savage, developed yet feeble in civilised man”.⁵¹

The ability to reason and reflect enables man to disregard his initial instinctive reactions, thus enabling him to isolate himself from his fellow man. As Rousseau noted, this allows man to say, “[a]t the sight of the misfortunes of others: ‘Perish if you will, I am secure.’ [A] murder may with impunity be committed under his window; he has only to put his hands to his ears and argue a little with himself, to prevent nature, which is shocked within him, from identifying itself with the unfortunate sufferer. Uncivilised man has not this admirable talent; and for want of reason and wisdom, is always foolishly ready to obey the first promptings of

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 70. While Mandeville and Rousseau are making completely different assumptions about the actual character of man, premises around which they constructed their theories, it is interesting to note that both would appear to contend that man was more ‘honest’ before the art of language, and the associated ability to use deceit, came into existence.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 75.

humanity”.⁵² This quote clearly illustrates how little faith Rousseau placed on the use of reason and reflection to temper the passions for the individual’s own betterment or the betterment of others.

As we will see in this and the following chapter, Smith agreed with many of the broadest conclusions made by Condillac and Rousseau regarding the primacy of the communication of the sentiments as the basis for inter-personal communication. Smith built a moral theory which rested upon their assumptions as to the nature of man’s constitution and the utilisation of articulated sounds to build a sense of an inter-connection between individuals. The roots of this process in both the case of moral and linguistic development was characterised by Smith as arising quite inadvertently from man’s natural reaction to either joy or pain, and from the universality of that experience. As a result, the next step arose, the intentional effort by man to make this connection on command. In order to do this, in both cases it was postulated that a system of communication was necessary so that people could interact. For this to be achieved, the ability to exchange thoughts necessitated a common medium by which to communicate: that is, mutually recognisable and acceptable signs relating to particular objects had to be created within a given society. This in turn required individuals through experience to learn the correct use of these signs, to recall the correct use of signs through reflection, and to adjust those signs using reason. The following section will develop this line of reasoning and explore both the adaptations and limitations of these assumptions regarding the nature of interpersonal communication in relation to Smith’s theory of moral sentiments.

⁵² Ibid.

2. The Contrast Between Smith's *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages* and His *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: The Origin of Language and The Origin of Moral Sentiments

It would seem that the most logical place to begin a search for Smith's linguistic theory as it relates to the development of human inter-communication would be in his *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Language*, published in 1761.⁵³ Although published after the writing of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this work was part of Smith's Edinburgh lectures on Rhetoric, which were first delivered in 1748. Given this chronology, it seems clear that the ideas laid out in *Considerations* pre-date the publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.⁵⁴ It is also important to note that the third through sixth editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* included this essay at the end of each edition, and was entitled *Dissertation Upon the Origins of Language*.⁵⁵

Within the first few sentences of the *Considerations* it becomes obvious that Smith was very much aware of the contemporary views of, and conjectural assumptions about, language. It is known that Smith had copies of Condillac's *Essai* (1746), and of his *Traité des sensations* (1754), and thus was probably familiar with Condillac's original discussion of the 'two savages', as well as exposure between the lectures and the publication of *Considerations* to Rousseau's adaptation of Condillac's theory in the *Discours* (1755). *Considerations* opens with the by now familiar account of the two savages that had never been taught to speak and had "been bred up remote from the societies of men".⁵⁶ In a fashion consistent with Mandeville, Condillac and Rousseau, Smith tied the impetus for the development language to these two savages' "endeavour to make their mutual wants intelligible to each other by uttering certain sounds, whenever they met to

⁵³ Smith, *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Language*, reprinted in, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, pp. 204 - 226.

⁵⁴ *Considerations* first appeared in *The Philosophical Miscellany* in 1761.

⁵⁵ See, Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Considerations*, p. 203.

denote certain objects”.⁵⁷ Over time, these two savages would begin to assign names to objects, signifying those things around them which were most familiar to them, and, which they had most reason to signify. These first words were in theory to have resulted from the need to express the essentials of personal existence, such as *cave*, due to the shelter it could offer, *tree*, due to the fruit it bore; and *fountain*, due to the thirst it could quench. Need would further drive mankind to associate these specifically named items with other like items around them which fitted the above classifications. This would in turn lead to the creation of plurals, such as *caves*, *trees*, and *fountains*. The ability to extrapolate in such a manner is seen as innate, with the correlation between objects being made naturally. As Smith noted, “mankind are naturally disposed to give to one object the name of any other, which nearly resembles it, and thus to denominate a multitude, by what originally was intended to express an individual”.⁵⁸ These connections were set into memory, and instantly recalled when like items were seen, and it was deemed necessary to “point out to each other, any of the new objects”.⁵⁹

Smith also agreed that the development of language involved an uninterrupted, gradual progression from primitive to more systematised languages. Over time, mankind began to group these similar items together and to formulate what Smith terms ‘species’ of like items based on ‘proper’ classes and assortments. After the rise of such categorisation, “it was impossible that the greater part of that almost infinite number of individuals, comprehended under each particular assortment or species, could have any peculiar or proper names of their own, distinct from the general names of the species”.⁶⁰ When it became necessary to name specific items, it also became necessary to name and distinguish the individual item based on its particular qualities, or on its relation to some other things. This resulted in a double categorisation, first of quality, and then of relation.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 203.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 204.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 204.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

Smith, in *Considerations* demonstrated both the importance of language as a means of expressing ideas, as well as the fact that man has an intellectual capacity for imagination, abstraction and generalisation. Yet Smith's discussion of these early stages of linguistic development is extremely fleeting and comprises no more than a few paragraphs. In this respect, Smith's account of the origin of language is critically different from other theorists of the age, in that his account does not encompass the earliest stages of communicative development, something seen as crucial in the discussions of Locke, Mandeville, Condillac, and Rousseau. For these other theorists, the vast majority of their discussion concerning the origin of language centred on those essential characteristics of man that influenced the motivation, ability, and creation of communication. In contrast, within the first few paragraphs of *Considerations*, speech, as well as rudimentary language skills, are already assumed. While acknowledging that man had started from a mute and brutish natural state, Smith quickly moved on to acknowledge that human beings, at some point in their development, formed language. Accordingly, Smith's discussion of the origins of language in the *Considerations* takes as given the articulation of words as a means of communication and does so without any thorough analysis of how man arrived at that stage. Dealing predominantly with the phonic and grammar of early languages, the greater part of the *Considerations* offers a strictly grammatical approach to the progress of language development. Thus, while the *Considerations* does offer some insight into Smith's views on language and demonstrates his obvious familiarity with the general trends and assumptions of the period regarding linguistic development, this work does not offer much insight into Smith's conception of the earliest evolution and dynamics of communication, topics that were essential to earlier theorists in describing the role of the expression of the sentiments in the development of language.

Such a discussion is to be found, however, in Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this work Smith presented, much in keeping with the contemporary discussion of language, a discussion of the very origins of human communication and the growing ability of individuals to connect with each other by expressing

their sentiments through the medium of language. With its focus on the transmission of the passions and sympathy, Smith uses *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to expand on that crucial time in man's development when innate cries were transformed into controlled and calculated reactions. It is this latter work, it will be argued, that offers the greatest insight into Smith's conception of how the birth and growth of human inter-communication came to be manifest and, in turn, came to influence the development of man's moral and social character.

A close analysis reveals that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* represents both a delineation of the concepts of communication which are at the very heart of the eighteenth-century discussion of language, as well as an effort to address the inherent problems in transmitting moral sentiments. On the one hand, Smith maintained that man has an inherent desire to communicate with, and receive sympathy from, other people; while on the other hand, man is faced with the inherent difficulty in clearly and accurately communicating these feelings because of the amorphous nature of sentiments and the inherent ambiguity of language. It is this struggle to find a generally acceptable moral standard, yet maintain the innately personal nature of moral development, which is a central tenet of Smith's theory of moral sentiments.

A. The Origins of Communication

While Smith's discussion in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* admittedly does not open with the classic model of two children lost in the desert, it does offer a detailed scenario that mirrors this archetype of early human development. In this regard, Smith is strikingly similar to both Rousseau and Hume, who contended that there needs to be social interaction before the formation of any concept of moral sentiments can occur. Smith stated, "[W]ere it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, *without communication* with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct. ... Bring him into society, and he is immediately

provided with the mirror which he wanted before”.⁶¹ It is clear that Smith assumed that any understanding by man of his moral universe, must occurred in the context of society and must have been gained through the medium of interpersonal communication.

Also, in keeping with Hume and the general premises of the period, Smith maintained in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that a person in isolation could not have an understanding of his or her sentiments without having others with whom to share them. Smith stated, “[T]he passions themselves, the desires or aversions, the joys or sorrows, which those objects excited, though of all things the most immediately present to him, could scarce ever be the objects of his thoughts. The idea of them could never interest him so much as to call upon his attentive consideration. ... Bring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions”.⁶² A person, who had grown up without any communication with society could thus perceive, but not judge as moral or immoral, his experiences of sentiments, be they good or bad. For “even though they should occur to him, they would by no means have the same effect on him, antecedent to his connexion with society” for all “sentiments suppose the idea of some other being”.⁶³ Therefore, in order for us to gain an understanding of how man comes to understand his sentiments, rather than merely respond to them, Smith argues that it is imperative for us to explore those sentiments within a social context.

Furthermore, Smith traced the origins of this inter-personal communication to man’s instinctive reactions to the sentiments. Smith began *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with a description of how we instinctively react to another’s physical and emotional response to pain or joy. Without any forethought, we immediately identify ourselves with the passion being experienced by the other person, and try

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 119. For similar explanation see Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 67.

⁶² Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D.D. Raphael & A.L. MacFie (eds.), (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984) pp. 110 - 111.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 193.

to put ourselves in that other person's situation and to imagine what we would feel if we were him or her. In fact, Smith characterised passions as, "original and immediate instincts" on par with hunger and thirst.⁶⁴ This reactive instinct is mirrored in the basic premises presented by Mandeville, Condillac and Rousseau in their description of the cries of nature, that result from man's innate identification with the delight or anguish of our fellow beings.

Based on this, Smith maintained that these initial cries represent a fundamental form of inter-personal connection. Smith developed this idea of universality when he commented on our 'fellow-feeling'. He noted that "[t]he passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any acknowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned".⁶⁵ This inter-connection was seen by Smith as the key to eventually causing those individual expressions of emotions to become linked to a communal understanding. For he presumed that "[W]hatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. ... In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible".⁶⁶ Thus, while expressions of certain passions such as grief, joy or a smiling face may be seen as being communicated instantaneously and antecedent to any knowledge of what has caused it, this does not hold true for the expression of all passions. Such emotions occur at these times because the expression on the other individual's face communicates the basic sentiments behind those expressions.

What we see emerging within these opening pages of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a representation of the primal elements of moral sentiments that uses a conjectural model of history which is firmly rooted within the then contemporary discourse regarding the origins of language. Unlike *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Language*, we find in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* a

⁶⁴ Ibid., footnote #10, pp. 77 -78.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

systematic and extensive discussion of how the first development of man's social nature are tied to the expressions of his fellow human beings and the mutual understanding of his fellow human beings' emotional state. Central to man's social development are the cries of nature, a topic that was seen as central to the contemporary assumptions surrounding primordial interpersonal communication of the period. As we will see, Smith goes on to use these assumptions regarding the fundamental elements of interpersonal communication, and eventual use of articulated language, to help illustrate and substantiate his conclusions regarding the manner in which man comes to an understanding of his moral nature.

B. The Movement from Natural Communication to Artificial Construct

As described in the previous section, human beings were deemed by Smith to have an innate ability to comprehend, and identify with, another's emotional state. Having established the foundation for the communication of the sentiments, it remained necessary for Smith to elaborate on how this process can be controlled and refined in order to maximise effective sympathetic communication; a goal which lies at the heart of his concept of moral sentiments. In studying his effort to do this, we witness once again Smith's apparent utilisation of contemporary assumptions concerning the nature of language and language use to help corroborate his conclusions regarding the nature of sympathy and its relation to the refinement of our moral sentiments.

For Smith, sympathy at its most general level is "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatsoever".⁶⁷ Smith noted that, though instantaneous, the instinctive sympathetic reaction is "always extremely imperfect" until we are informed of the actual cause.⁶⁸ These original 'bodily' passions, "excite either no sympathy at all, or such a degree of it, as is altogether disproportioned [*sic*] to the violence of what is felt by the sufferer".⁶⁹ Thus, though we are moved instinctively to react in such a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

manner, we are neither in control of that reaction nor certain as to the other individual's exact circumstances. Because of this, Smith noted, the first question we must ask when we meet someone with whom we want to sympathise is, "[W]hat has befallen you? Till this is answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable".⁷⁰ It is necessary, therefore, that the innate physical response to our fellow man's corporal signs of anguish or joy be conveyed more precisely, if we are to maximise our understanding and connect with the other individual. In order to achieve this goal, we must engage others in conversation and explore as precisely as possible another individual's sentiments.

Smith contended that essential to this process of understanding is the individual's ability to enter into, and actively engage in, social discourse. Smith opined, "[W]ere it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face."⁷¹ Smith proceeded to assert, in a statement very much in keeping with Hume's discussion in Book II, Section III of the *Treatise*, "[B]ring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions". Smith went on to say that, if a man from birth was separated from society, he would be pre-occupied with the immediate and instinctive push and pull of the passions to such a degree that they "could scarce even be the objects of his thoughts".⁷² However, once exposed to society, man is able to use these passions as the foundation of new, more social, passions that are shaped by the approval and

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 11 - 12.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁷² Ibid., p. 110.

disapproval of those around him.

This effort at continual refinement of this societal connection between individuals is central to this premise. Smith contended throughout his exploration of moral sentiments, that it is ultimately the need to establish equilibrium between the innate ambiguity of our sentiments, and the need to establish standards of moral judgements, that is central to the establishment of a working set of moral sentiments. He maintained that the natural passions, as discussed in the previous section, over time, gradually develop into reactions that the individual can control and manipulate. But what would motivate such a change? In keeping with the contemporary assumptions about the origin and development of language, this crucial shift is initiated by a desire, first, to communicate the passions, and second, to elicit others to give sympathy. Locke and Condillac, it should be remembered, advanced the former motivation as the reason behind the development of language; the latter, namely, the desire to persuade was advocated by Mandeville. Finally, Rousseau argued that both aspects played a part in the formation of language.

As for the first element, Smith noted that “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary”.⁷³ In turn, as for those men around us, “[W]e enter, in this case too, into the pain which his presence must give to every mortal with whom he converses, to those especially with whom we are most apt to sympathise, the unfortunate and the injured”.⁷⁴ Thus, in order to maximise this exchange, there must exist some means by which an individual on the one hand can effectively elicit sympathy, and to accurately gauge our reaction in light of other people’s felt need for our participation in their sentiments, on the

⁷³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

other. Sympathy was thus judged by Smith to be not only the origin of man's desire for inter-communication, but also the reason why he works to perfect this communication.

Smith's notion that the sympathetic mechanism played an important role in the development of morals was adopted from Hume. It should be noted, however, that the two neither agree on the relationship between sympathy and moral sentiments, nor on what actually constituted the appropriate object of a sympathetic response. For example, Hume presented the idea that sympathy was a type of emotional infection and as such did not require any practical concern for the other individual. In contrast, Smith saw sympathy as arising from the ability to consciously view a situation and to then enter into the other person's feelings. Sympathy was portrayed by Smith not as a gut reaction, but rather an immediate attempt to make an interpretation of the situation and to proffer a calculated and regulated response. Smith also broadened and generalised the idea of sympathy, by characterising it as the cement of human society and the basis for the formulation of social attitudes. In contrast, Hume gravitated toward the idea of mutual dependence and utility, rather than sympathy, as the fundamental bonds that make up society.

As a result of this difference in interpretation of the nature of sympathy, Smith conceived of sympathy as the driving mechanism and desire behind the development of moral sentiment. This desire to know another's sentiments is portrayed by Smith as being a two-way process. We not only desire sympathy, but also, in turn, can hardly resist entering into sympathetic connection with someone else. In this sense, both our longing and benevolence are ingrained in our nature. To better satisfy these desires, man must develop and refine the most accurate and effective means by which this inter-change can take place.

Smith's goal in writing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was, in large part, to explain what man must do to create an effective exchange of the moral sentiments through the sympathetic mechanism. Smith's contended that in order for this to

even occur it was necessary for man to modify his natural reactions to the passions by imposing an artificial construct on them. By reflecting upon and then altering his initial reaction so that it corresponds with what these general rules would dictate to be the correct expression in the particular circumstances, man can put himself in a position to gain the maximum amount of sympathy. Essential to this process is an understanding of, and control over, those initially instinctive reactions, so that he can communicate that which is required to compel another's understanding and, as a result, gain the maximum of the others' sympathy. The only way this can be achieved is by his understanding how others characterise the correct communication of sympathy in a given situation. Because mankind is able to act in accordance with general rules of practice, we are also able to pursue consistent lines of action relatively independent of the immediate prompting of the sentiments.⁷⁵ This allows for the gradual but steady progression from simple reactive expressions of the passions to the eventual calculated moral reactions.

The creation of set standards further implies that we are eventually able to understand, and to a degree participate in, sentiments which we ourselves are not moved to share. While our natural sentiments may not allow us to share in the spirit of the moment, Smith maintained that "[W]e have learned, however, from experience, what sort of pleasantry is upon most occasions capable of making us laugh, and we observe that this is one of that kind. We approve, therefore, of the laughter of company, and feel that it is natural and suitable to its object; because, though in our present mood we cannot enter into it, we are sensible that upon most occasions we should very heartily join in it".⁷⁶ In this manner, we are able to participate to some degree in the communication of the sentiments taking place, though we ourselves are not moved by such sentiments. While our hearts might be devoid of a contemporaneous experience of these sentiments for whatever reason,

⁷⁵ T. D. Cambell, Adam Smith's Science of Morals (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971) p. 66.

⁷⁶ Smith, Moral Sentiments, p. 18.

this nevertheless does not prevent us from participating intellectually in the social exchange of such sentiments if they comply with our general rules of appropriateness.

To substantiate this claim Smith notes that when, for example, we are informed of the death of a man's father, we may, for whatever reason, not feel the slightest instinctive sympathy. Still, even though we are not naturally moved to sympathy, we learn through experience that such misfortune naturally excites in the other person sorrow. Once we make an effort and become aware of this fact, we should offer them our sympathy. "It is upon the consciousness of this conditional sympathy," Smith notes, "that our approbation of his sorrow is founded, even in those cases in which that sympathy does not actually take place; and the general rules derived from our preceding experience of what our sentiments would commonly correspond with, correct upon this, as upon other occasions, the impropriety of our present emotions".⁷⁷ It is this ability to respond in a sympathetic manner in situations that do not arouse our natural instincts of sympathy, which marks the transition from an instinctive response to a calculated effort to manage our sympathetic reaction.

Like Hume, Smith realised that without some sort of common standards, each individual would approach this interaction from his or her own unique perspective and thus could not communicate competently with another. With each person having their own personal prejudices and guided by their own self-interests, there would be no common perspective and thus no common medium by which to communicate the sentiments accurately and effectively. Without such a common medium, the process would ultimately be impossible. Smith noted, "[W]hen we first come into the world, from the natural desire to please, we accustom ourselves to consider what behaviour is likely to be agreeable to every person we converse with, to our parents, to our masters, to our companions. We address ourselves to individuals, and for some time fondly pursue the impossible and absurd project of

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

gaining the good will and approbation of every body. We are soon taught by experience, however, that this universal approbation is altogether unattainable”⁷⁸ Smith, like Hume, was also aware that, in attempting to identify with an individual, one will inevitably offend another unless two things are present: There must be some means by which one commands an ability to modify their own personal perspective; and one must make those modifications in line with socially acceptable standards.⁷⁹

Smith regarded the ‘impartial spectator’ as serving a crucial role in redressing this balance and facilitating the proper communication of the sentiments. While the ‘spectator’ was a familiar figure in eighteenth-century discourse in relation to polite ethics and was, for example, employed as a learning device by Smith’s teacher, Hutcheson, as well as Hume, it is in Smith’s theory that it is first used in a strictly philosophical way. The role of the ‘spectator’ comes to take this central role in Smith’s theory because the point of view of the ‘spectator’ is represented that view from which moral judgements are made.⁸⁰ Therefore, for Smith it is not possible for man to derive a true and honest understanding of moral judgements from sympathy without looking at the sympathetic sentiments in question from the point of a spectator.

To achieve this necessary perspective, it is essential for the individual to attempt to remove himself from his own bias and to assume a third person’s perspective. As characterised by Smith, the impartial spectator is assumed both to have complete knowledge; and as a spectator, be apart from the situation and able to judge it in a neutral manner. Thus, the ideal impartial spectator would be in a position to know all the facts, but not actually personally involved. By adopting this perspective when judging situations, one’s chances of making a correct assessment are dramatically increased and, in turn, allow an effective and accurate communication of sentiments to occur.

⁷⁸ Ibid., at footnote #31, added in ed. 2 (and in the draft revision of 1759) p. 129.

⁷⁹ See, Hume, *Enquiry*, Section V, Part II, pp. 67 - 69.

⁸⁰ T.D. Cambell, *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971) p. 126.

Attaining the perspective of the impartial spectator requires the building of communication skills based on social interaction. This, in turn, leads to the construction of general moral guidelines. To gain both the neutrality and experience necessary to take on the role of the impartial spectator requires us to study the implementation these skills from those around us that assume that role. "Our continual observations upon the conduct of others," argues Smith, "insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided".⁸¹ As with language, those rules require us to "learn from experience" the correct use of the right sign in the appropriate instance. Over time, this allows for a system of general rules to be formed. "We have learned," Smith noted, "from experience, that such a misfortune naturally excites such a degree of sorrow ... even in those cases in which that sympathy does not actually take place; and the general rules derived from our preceding experience of what our sentiments would commonly correspond with, correct upon this, as upon many other occasions, the impropriety of our present emotions".⁸² While we may very well attempt to perfect our moral sense by personal reflection, ultimately, it can be developed only through social interaction. This point is made clear when Smith asserted that, "men of retirement and speculation, who are apt to sit brooding at home over either grief or resentment, though they may often have more humanity, more generosity, and a nicer sense of honour, yet seldom possess that equality [sic.] of temper which is so common among men of the world".⁸³

The goal of this 'rule learning' and 'application process' is to master the correlation between a given situation and the appropriate reaction. Significantly for Smith, though, this process is not derived from some enshrined set of rules existing as an entity outside our own personal experience, but, rather, the formation of such standards are dependent on the discovery of them through our own experience. "We do not," asserts Smith, "originally approve or condemn particular actions;

⁸¹ Smith, Moral Sentiments, p. 159.

⁸² Ibid., p. 18.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 23.

because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstance in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of".⁸⁴ Smith states that, "by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension,"⁸⁵ a general understanding of the correct use of sentiments is created within society. Smith is of the opinion that, "[W]hat is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper. The sentiments which they approve of, are graceful and becoming: the contrary, ungraceful and unbecoming. The very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those faculties".⁸⁶

Smith's contentions in this regard echoed Hume's basic premise that societal moral norms are evidenced by the application of specific words of approbation or derision associated with specific sentiments as defined within a social context. However, the degree to which these categorisations dictate our conception of these sentiments differs greatly between the two theorists. While Smith acknowledged that such a classification exists, it is important to note that it does not take on the significance that it did for Hume. In Smith's judgement, the use of commonly recognised words to distinguish between sentiments is necessary for communication, but this conclusion does not rise to the level of Hume's faith in the capacity of linguistic convention to accurately reflect and embody societal moral standards. As we shall see in the following section, this causes Smith to present a much more personalised and internalised means or coming to an understanding of the nature of man's moral sentiments, and in turn, his characterisation and use of references to language and language use reflect this contrasting image of morality.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 160.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

3. The Gaining of Proficiency in the Communication of Morals

For Smith, and similar in fashion to the growth in proficiency witnessed in linguistic usage, as our knowledge of the medium of moral sentiments become more and more developed, the act of moral judgement gradually becomes almost instinctive as well. It is a skill, however, that takes time and effort to develop. Smith maintained that, "with a weak man, it is not of long continuance. His own view of his situation immediately recurs upon him. He abandons himself, as before, to sighs and tears lamentations; and endeavours, like a child that has not yet gone to school, to produce some sort of harmony between his own grief and compassion of the spectator, not only by moderating the former, but by importantly calling upon the latter".⁸⁷ In contrast, one who has begun to master his sentiments, "does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel".⁸⁸ It is thus through a process of "habitual reflection" that an individual begins both to demand, and to give, the correct amount of sympathy and do so without conscious reflection.⁸⁹

At this stage, we finally learn to act in accordance with the wishes of the impartial spectator. This entire process by which one masters the communication of moral sentiments is vividly demonstrated in Smith's example of its progressive development in a child. He noted that while a child has no self-command, they do have the ability to naturally communicate their fears, grief, anger, etc. to those around them. Smith also noted that, except perhaps for angry outbursts, the parents tend to indulge those reactions and give the child what he wants. As the child ages, however, such partiality is not to be so easily found amongst their peers. Still craving partiality and wanting to avoid contempt, the child learns that he himself

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 146.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

must moderate his behaviour to the degree that his play-fellows are likely to find pleasing. Smith goes on to say that the child has at this point entered “into the great school of self-command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection”.⁹⁰ (See Appendix A) This illustration of early childhood succinctly summarised Smith’s premise that there necessarily must be a transition from an instinctive to a more controlled awareness of our sentiments. Likewise, through a process of education, association, and communication, we learn to manipulate and refine those sentiments in order to maximise our sentimental connection with those around us.

Having presented his theory of moral sentiment communication, Smith then presented the reader with what can best be characterised as an effective moral ‘dialogue’: “In all such cases, that there may be some correspondence of sentiments between the spectator and the person principally concerned, the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded”.⁹¹ Likewise, the person who wishes to gain the maximum amount of sympathy realises that he must attempt to lower his passions and attempt to determine just how much sympathy the spectator would be willing to give. “To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect” Smith asserted, “beat in time to his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation. But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with them. He must flatten ... the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him”.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹² Ibid., p. 22.

This is an effort, in essence, to discover what is in the mind of the spectator, what his perception of the situation is, and thus what ideas he has formulated in his mind as to what is the proper reaction in such a situation. Rather than characterising this as an effort for each to meet the other half-way, it is better characterised as an attempt by one to seek out the other's level of perception and to communicate to each other what they, in mutual fashion, judge appropriate given the situation. While this will not lead to perfect communication of the exact sentiment being felt, the "two sentiments, however, may, it is evident, have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society. Though they will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required".⁹³

The characterisation of what is necessary as the communication of sentiments become more refined again parallels that of the contemporary Enlightenment discussion of language and language use. Locke and Condillac's emphasis was on proper signification was reflected in Smith's repeated reference to the requirement that the expression of moral sentiments be "precisely suited to its object",⁹⁴ and "proper ... to their object".⁹⁵ For either a linguistic or moral system to function, the terms used within the medium must be as precise as possible if there is to be a mutual understanding and compliance. For accurate communication to take place, be it in relation to the sentiments or more generally, the key is to come to an understanding and mastery of the terms at hand, their general meaning and accepted usage. Only when all the parties have a full and accurate understanding of what is being signified, and what that signifier properly elicits, can any form of interpersonal communication effectively take place.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

4. The Personal Nature of Moral Sentiments: The Influence of Conversation and Association on the formation of Moral Sentiments

Given the dynamics of Smith's system, it is clear that the only way the perspective of the impartial spectator, and thus accurate moral judgements, can be attained is by actively entering into conversation with other members of society. Significantly, he believed that the more distant the person is from his or her own selfish interests, the better this individual is able to gain an accurate gauge for the modification of our sentiments. This is because, "[T]he conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still better temper". The reason for this is that, "[T]he man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator: and it is always from that spectator, from whom we can expect the least sympathy and indulgence, that we are likely to learn the most complete lesson of self-command".⁹⁶ It would seem that our being more distant from, and less connected to, the source from which we take our cue, the greater its aid in our efforts to reduce our sentiments "to a pitch which any impartial spectator can approve of".⁹⁷ Due to the lack of natural inclination to sympathise with us, it is the ability to communicate effectively and accurately our sentiments to a stranger that is most essential to the development of our moral sentiments. This also implies our need to have mastered the most effective and accurate means of communication and persuasion in order for this to be possible. It would seem that Smith believed the best gauge of our learning of this skill, and of its successful mastery, is in our ability to bring a stranger from remoteness to sympathetic understanding.

This focus on drawing the basis of our general rules from as wide a range of experience as possible appears also consistent with Smith's contention that, because we have only our experience on which to base the formation of such rules, the pool of individuals we draw our observations from plays a critical role in the

⁹⁶ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 153 - 154.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

shaping of the sentiments. Reflecting the concerns of both Shaftesbury and Addison, given the means by which these general rules of moral action are formed, Smith stressed that the character of these interactions are coloured by those with whom we keep company. Since those with whom we converse on a regular basis are seen as integral to the formation of our moral character, their leanings toward virtue or vice will in turn affect the framework of our own moral character. Like Shaftesbury, Smith stressed that we must be careful from whom we draw our moral lessons.

In accordance with this premise, Smith stated that the “natural disposition to accommodate and to assimilate, as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings, to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with, is the cause of the contagious effects of both good and bad company”. He continued, “[t]he man who associates chiefly with the wise and the virtuous, though he may not himself become either wise or virtuous, cannot help conceiving a certain respect at least for wisdom and virtue”.⁹⁸ The opposite is true for those who associate with the “profligate and dissolute”. The manifestation of this fact was recognised by Smith such that “[T]he similarity of family characters, which we so frequently see transmitted through several successive generations, may, perhaps, be partly owing to this disposition, to assimilate ourselves to those whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with”.⁹⁹

In this sense, we see developing in Smith’s theory the assumption that there is a spectrum of possible manifestations of moral sentiments; something that was also present in Hume’s works. For Smith, however, these general spheres of social awareness do not involve individuals’ moral understanding being linked together by, and evidenced in, linguistic conventions. Rather the understanding of our moral sentiments is gained through personal conversation on a more personal,

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 224.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

though no less social, level. Although both Smith and Hume appeared to be a more or less universal sense of right and wrong that still exists and is waiting to be discovered, in Smith's view, the reason that this was not always realised is because the individual can be led astray from reaching that level of virtue by drawing his or her assumptions about virtue and vice from the wrong sources.

Smith's vision of multifarious possibilities of contacts that come to shape our sense of reality does not necessarily negate Hume's contentions regarding linguistic constructs. Even within this realm of inter-personal contacts outlined by Smith, there would seem to be over-arching moral constraints reflected in language use and recognised by society as a whole. These more general moral norms would in turn come to be reflected within the micro-social universe that Smith is so concerned about. However, in the case of Smith it appears that the reality of over-arching moral values was taken more or less for granted, for his primary concern lay in the method by which we shape our own moral sentiments within the societal spectrum of virtue and vice to which we find ourselves exposed in everyday life.

With *each* association characterised by Smith as resulting in the manifestation of a slightly altered moral universe, an individual modifies his or her assumptions about the moral sentiments over time. For example, while family traits may be passed on through several generations, this is not in any way pre-destined. When such familial links are lost, long separated family members are no longer assumed by Smith to share in the same moral universe as they did before. Though, indeed, absence may make the heart grow fonder, in this case, Smith argued that time often conspires against the individual's ability to open their heart to what would be considered the closest of kin. Family members who have been separated for long periods of time, ultimately:

[H]ave never lived in the situation that almost necessarily forces that easy accommodation, and though they may now be sincerely desirous to assume it, they have really become incapable of doing so. Their familiar conversation and intercourse soon become less

pleasing to them, and, upon that account, less frequent. They may continue to live with one another in the mutual exchange of all essential good offices, and with every other external appearance of decent regard. But that cordial satisfaction, that delicious sympathy, that confidential openness and ease, which naturally take place in the conversation of those who have lived long and familiarly with one another, it seldom happens that they can completely enjoy.¹⁰⁰

It is nurture, not nature, which in Smith's world shapes man with regard to his moral sentiments.

Likewise, it would appear that, rather than focusing upon the existence of overarching, culturally defined, moral constructions evident within linguistic convention as Hume had reasoned, Smith instead concentrated on the host of micro-social units that come to colour each individual's unique moral reality. Hume certainly would share Smith's conclusion that it is indeed ultimately nurture not nature that shapes our moral sense. They would also both seem to agree that it is an awareness of societal rules of morality gained through an understanding of moral norms made accessible through language and language use that is central to shaping our conduct. However, Hume seems to maintain that the guiding principle behind this belief is ultimately the social utility offered by these standards, and the general acceptance in society of the utility of those standards as reflected in the language itself, occur at macro societal level. Smith's fundamental point, and one he returned to time and time again, is that these macro-utility considerations only play a marginal part in shaping our moral sense. In real terms, the agency which *does* play the primary role in this is the impartial spectator; a much more personal locus of influence. In turn, to Smith, the daily shaping of the internalised impartial spectator in his everyday discourse with his fellow man was the principle concern.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

5. Assumptions of Honesty and Veracity in Sympathetic and Linguistic Exchange

In this section, we will briefly explore one other element underlying Smith's commutative theory, namely, the need for honesty and openness in verbal exchange. Smith, very much in keeping with the discussion in the previous chapter on Hume, placed great importance on the fundamental assumption that morality is dependent on the honest use of the common medium of language. Smith stressed that, "[F]rankness and openness conciliate confidence. We must trust a man who is willing to trust us. ... Reserve and concealment, on the contrary, call forth diffidence". He went on to state that, "[T]he great pleasure of conversation, and indeed of society, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another. But this most delightful harmony cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions".¹⁰¹ This is very similar in wording to Hume's discussion of the origin of natural virtues in Part Three of the *Treatise*, and reflects Hume's emphasis on this point as it relates to effective interaction.¹⁰²

In contrast to Smith's scenario in the above quotation, the individual who is unwilling to freely, honestly, and openly enter into such an exchange is held in some contempt. "The man who eludes our most innocent questions," affirmed Smith, "who gives no satisfaction to our most inoffensive inquiries, who plainly wraps himself up in impenetrable obscurity, seems, as it were, to build a wall about his breast. We run forward to get within it, with all the eagerness of harmless curiosity; and feel ourselves all at once pushed back with the rudest and most

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 337.

¹⁰² In the *Treatise*, Part III, Section 1, Hume stated: "The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motions of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature. When I see the *effects* of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself", Hume, *Treatise*, p. 237.

offensive violence”.¹⁰³ Clearly, this was seen by Smith as an attempt to isolate oneself from society at a fundamental level. Further, such actions deny other members of society, who wish to sympathise, the ability to do so. In essence, such an action is seen as not merely cutting oneself off from society, but essentially undermining the social cohesion of the community as a whole. It is the free sharing and exchange of sympathy that binds the society together; when confronted with such recalcitrance, society naturally reacts intensely against it. Those who do not openly and honestly participate in the process of communication not only deny themselves, but also deny others, the pleasures of sympathetic interaction.

While Smith seemed quite willing to admonish those who *purposefully* engage in such actions, he extended a great deal of pity to those individuals unfortunate enough to *mistakenly* be thrust into such an unpleasant position. These latter situations most often arise when members of society, for whatever reason, fail to believe that the individual in question is sharing his sentiments openly and honestly. As with Hume, Smith implied by this that a high degree of honesty must be assumed and maintained in order to assure the accurate transmission of morals. When such honesty is seen to be lacking, even if mistakenly, the willingness of society to bestow a sympathetic response is found wanting. Because of this, Smith claimed that “[T]he man who had the misfortune to imagine that nobody believed a single word he said, would feel himself the outcast of human society, would dread every thought of going into it, or of presenting himself before it, and could scarce fail, I think, to die of despair”.¹⁰⁴ Even if an individual mistakenly deceives someone, he or she may suffer a similar fate. Smith lamented, “[T]hough this involuntary falsehood may frequently be no mark of any want of veracity, of any want of judgement, or want of memory, of improper credulity, of some degree of precipitancy and rashness. It always diminishes our authority to persuade, and always brings some degree of suspicion upon our fitness to lead and direct”.¹⁰⁵ Whether purposefully or not, a perceived lack of sincerity in the use of language is

¹⁰³ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

seen as a reprehensible act because it undermines the most fundamental assumption of communication - veracity. Without veracity, the entire edifice of language, the facilitating medium of all interchange, individual moral sentiments crumbles.

6. The Tension between Communication of Sympathy and Moral Judgement

At the start of this chapter it was argued that there are striking parallels between how Smith conceived of the origin and development of moral sentiments and the conception of the origin, nature, and development of language proffered by the likes of Condillac and Rousseau. In both cases the origin of communication is to be found in the instinctive expression of the passions in the presence of other individuals. Because of the uniformity of these reactions between individuals, a common core of sentiments is presumed to exist. Upon the recognition of these common passions, a desire arises to express them, to share them, to persuade others to identify with them, and to give sympathy. In order for any of these to occur, one must make the proper observations of society, have the ability to reflect on what one wishes to express, and do so in such a manner as to maximise understanding. By undergoing this process, we develop a set of general rules that we use to guide and modify our moral sentiments.

But, while Smith maintained that the system of communicating moral sentiment could be formulated around general rules, he did not entirely surrender the development of moral judgement to these general rules. Because of the deeply personal and complex nature of moral sentiments, Smith was greatly perplexed by the difficulties in formulating a set of rules accurate enough to allow complete and effective communication to occur. While the greater part of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is an effort to trace the origin, development, and means of formulating rules to guide moral sentiments, scattered throughout the text are efforts by Smith to explain to the reader that these 'rules' in the end can only serve as guidelines. It is clear that ultimately Smith was convinced that no matter how masterful we become in the skill of communicating our sentiments, mankind can never fully

depend on a concrete, socially constructed set of moral rules to govern our entire ethical decision making.

Smith appeared to have placed great faith in the idea that, by observation and reason, man could be guided to an understanding of the vague and complex ideas of “what is prudent, of what is decent, of what is generous or noble”. He also believed over a period of time this process would lead to the creation of “general maxims of morality” on which the greater part of our moral judgements could be formulated.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, however, Smith believed that the relative effectiveness of any guidelines is dictated by, “the precision and exactness, or the looseness and inaccuracy of the general rules themselves”.¹⁰⁷ While, throughout the text, Smith did refer to these guiding principles as ‘rules,’ he was also forced to admit that the principles he had laid out to guide the passions, sentiments and morals (which by their very nature are loose and inaccurate ideas) are subject to myriad exceptions and modifications. Such ‘rules’ cannot, in the end, entirely regulate our conduct. Smith succinctly articulated this contention in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* when he asserted that:

The different passions all proceed in like manner from different states of mind and outward circumstances. But it would be both endless and useless to go thro’ all these different affections and passions in this manner. It would be endless, because tho the simple passions are of no great number, yet these are so compounded, in different manners as to make a number of mixt ones almost infinite. It would be useless, for tho we had gone thro all the different affections yet the differences of character and age and circumstances of the person would so vary the affects that our rules would not be at all applicable.¹⁰⁸

As a result, it is Smith’s contention that “[W]e shall stand in need of no casuistic rules to direct our conduct. These it is [*sic*] often impossible to accommodate to all the different shades and graduation of circumstance, character, and situation, to

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Lecture 13, p. 69.

differences and distinctions which, although not imperceptible, are, by their nicety and delicacy, often altogether undefinable”.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this reasoning, Smith characterised the guiding principles governing the expression of the vast majority of the sentiments not as rules, but rather as what might be characterised as ‘style’.¹¹⁰ The latter, being much more amorphous and nuance, seems to fit Smith’s characterisation of the sentiments most accurately.

What makes this naming and labelling process so difficult brings us to our second major complication in Smith’s view, that because of the inherent limitations of language, the nuances of the sentiments can never be accurately expressed. Smith seems to have judged language as the limiting factor in the perfection of a sympathetic response. As he stated, “[T]hey have only endeavoured to ascertain, as far as language is capable of ascertaining” how such sympathetic interaction is possible.¹¹¹ Smith was emphatic that, while general maxims and ideas about sentiments can be formulated and signified, “[i]t is impossible by language to express, if I may say so, the invisible features of all the different modifications of passion as they show themselves within. There is no other way of marking and distinguishing them from one another”¹¹² In a larger sense, Smith had to admit that fixed moral rules in almost every case, are not only insufficient, but also, unattainable. The one notable exception is the virtue of justice, a topic that we will take up in the coming section.

Although Smith saw the sentiments as being labelled and categorised so that some loose standards relating to the various types of morals could be made, he considers this process as being greatly hindered by the inherent limitations of language. This fundamental limitation in the nature of language itself is reflected in a host of Smith’s writings. Thus, in his essay *Of the External Senses*, Smith noted that “[T]he language which nature addresses to our eyes, has evidently a

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 227.

¹¹⁰ Smith elsewhere compares it to, “the rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and eloquent in composition”, Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 175.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

fitness of representation, an aptitude for signifying the precise things which it denotes, much superior to that of any of the artificial languages which human art and ingenuity have ever been able to invent".¹¹³ In Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, he is reported to have stated, in relation to oral contracts, that "the uncertainty of language ... would make it hard to determine whether a man barely signified his intention or made a promise".¹¹⁴ The limitations of language was further expanded upon in Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*: "But whatever the difficulty there is in expressing the external objects that are the objects of our senses; there must be far greater in describing the internal ones, which pass within the mind itself and are the objects of none of our senses. We have no parts into which we can separate them nor any by describing which we can convey the notion of desire".¹¹⁵ Lastly, these conclusions about the inherent limitations of language, as it relates to the expression of moral sentiments is succinctly stated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* where Smith asserted that, unlike the rules of grammar, "there are no rules by the knowledge of which we can infallibly be taught to act upon all occasions with prudence, with just magnanimity, or proper beneficence: though there are some which may enable us to correct and ascertain, in several respects, the imperfect ideas which we might otherwise have entertained of those virtues".¹¹⁶ It seems clear that Smith's continual emphasis on this ambiguity, which occurs across the entire spectrum of his writings over the course of his career, reflects his distrust of language's ability to enshrine and categorise, definitely and accurately, the sentiments.

This attempt to strike a balance between what can and cannot be communicated dominates a large part of Smith's discussion in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For it is the juxtaposition between the desire to communicate one's sentiments and the difficulty in expressing them accurately, due in large part to the inherent

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, W.P.D. Wightman & J.C. Bryce (eds.), (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982) *Of The External Senses*, p. 158.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael & P.G. Stein (eds.), (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982) p. 94.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Lecture 13, p. 68.

limitations of language, which becomes a notable point of concern within his theory. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is at least in part an attempt by Smith to explain the complex and conflicting relationship between on the one hand, the need and desire to communicate sentiments and our inability to consistently do so, on the other. In order to overcome this hurdle, we must cultivate our sensibilities and capacities for judgement, on the assumption that the more perfect our faculties and sensibilities work the more able we will be able to reconcile this problem.

We also witness in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* a related problem caused by the inherent difficulties in a theory that requires us to remove ourselves from the passions being experienced in order that we find a mutually acceptable level at which maximum sympathy can be given. This, in turn, creates a conflict between our natural sympathies and our need to adopt a neutral stance. This neutral stance is necessary for establishing neutral moral standards, for creating a mutually acceptable medium of communication and, ultimately, for assuring the greatest amount of sympathy. In order to achieve this, Smith famously insisted that we adopt the role of an impartial spectator in order to judge the correct reaction. The use of the impartial spectator allowed Smith to create the impartiality and neutrality necessary for accurate moral decision making. More important, given Smith's scheme of morals, it permits the individual to see how best to solicit a sympathetic response from another individual. For "the impartial spectator; which allows no word, no gesture, to escape it beyond what this more equitable sentiment would dictate"¹¹⁷ is the ultimate judge of our actions.

But while the impartial spectator serves to bolster the commutative framework, the concept also represents Smith's last, and perhaps largest obstacle, in his attempts to present a working system of morals. For the impartial spectator represents not only dispassionate judgement, but also the inherently individualistic nature of moral decision making. In judging our own reactions to situations via the

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 176.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

impartial spectator, we also inevitably judge ourselves. In our search for approval, one whose approval we seek is our own, in the form of the interior audience, which has a unique set of standards established by a unique set of experiences. As a result, this internal self knows more, or at least *thinks* it knows more, and than the external spectators and thus has more influence than they do. At times this increased knowledge, perhaps, pseudo-knowledge, forces us to forsake all others and strike out on our own. Thus, even given our desire to gain sympathy, and given the general guiding principles on how this sympathy can be maximised through accurate communication, in the end Smith was forced to admit that all these desires at times must be discarded. For in certain situations, “[T]he applause of the whole world will avail us little, if our own conscience condemn us; and the disapprobation of all mankind is not capable of oppressing us, when we are absolved by the tribunal within our own breast, when our mind tells us that mankind are in the wrong”.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, however, Smith began the next paragraph by stating, “[B]ut though this tribunal within the breast be thus the supreme arbiter of all our actions, though it can reverse the decisions of all mankind with regard to our character and conduct, and mortify us amidst the applause, or support us under the censure of the world; yet if we enquire into the origin of its institution, its jurisdiction we shall find is in a great measure derived from the authority of that very tribunal, whose decisions it so often and so justly reverses”.¹¹⁹

What Smith presented here could be characterised as a simple ‘chicken and egg’ problem of sorting out what really motivates our response. Thus, the question which needed to be addressed is: Would not the impartial spectator, in the same scenario, also rely on an individual’s decision to go it alone, since his decision is ultimately based on what might be termed acceptable exceptions to the general rules? Or is it the case, given Smith’s theory as outlined in this thesis, that this ability to stand against the whole world is the prerogative of any individual because

¹¹⁸ Ibid., at footnote #31, added in ed. 2 (and in the draft revision of 1759), p. 129.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

these 'general rules' are ultimately of their own making? If the sentiments and character are ultimately shaped by the individual's own unique effort to learn from personal experience and to establish guiding principles, is he not, by following his own will, ultimately following the general rules that the individual has worked so hard to formulate? Isn't the individual's decision not to go along with the general rules yet another building block in his personal understanding and mastery of them? It would seem that Smith would answer the above questions in the affirmative. While the 'impartial spectator' may appear to be going against the established social standards, that decision is based upon the understanding the individual has come to construct of the moral universe themselves.

However, the basis of how the individual comes to an understanding of what will bring them inner peace, what in fact gives us a conception of what this 'higher moral authority' dictates, is still in question. Given Smith's overall theory, the conclusions regarding what equates to inner peace would surely be shaped by the same process that moulded our understanding of the larger societal standards. If this is the case, it would appear that even the most apparently 'anti-social' decision on the part of the impartial spectator is in reality shaped by that very same process of inter-personal and refining conversation contact as was involved in coming to our understanding of the general moral standards acceptable to the community at large.

Having looked at the problems associated with relating the sentiments to communal moral standards, we will next turn our attention to the one notable exception to Smith's general rejection of hard and fast rules in relation to the sentiments. Smith contented that the concept of justice stands in stark contrast, both in character and manifestation, to the other sentiments.' In the following section, we will explore the unique character of this sentiment and the ramifications of its differences on both morality and linguistics. As we will see, the fact that rules of justice can be formulated and imposed has dramatic consequences for both this sentiment's character and expression.

7. The Effects of Smith's Linguistic Suppositions on His Characterisation of Justice

As with Hume, justice was portrayed by Smith as a fundamental element in man's conception of what is essential to both virtuous action and societal order. Similarly, the virtue of justice is portrayed as a universal characteristic, because it manifests itself in every nation and in every language. "[T]he word," states Smith, "it is to be observed, which expresses justice in the Greek language, has several different meanings; and as the correspondent [sic.] word in all other languages, so far as I know, has the same, there must be some natural affinity among those various significations".¹²⁰ Smith seemed to suppose that because the concept of justice has manifested itself in the language of every nation, it must therefore be universal.

Like Hume, Smith considered the utility of justice to be central. Justice makes a functioning society possible and, since such an orderly society naturally pleases, mankind enjoys its contemplation. Thus, an individual recognises that, "his own interest is connected with the prosperity of society, and that the happiness, perhaps the preservation of his existence, depends upon its preservation. Upon every account, therefore, he has an abhorrence at whatever can tend to destroy society, and is willing to make use of every means, which can hinder so hated and so dreadful an event".¹²¹ Because justice plays a fundamental role in society's preservation, we therefore have a natural proclivity to acknowledge and approve of its useful purpose.

However, the way in which Smith characterised the manifestation of this universal idea of justice within society differed from that of Hume. Rather than seeing justice as the central edifice of society and thus reflected in, and reinforced

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 269.

¹²¹ Ibid., footnote #1, p. 87 - 88.

by, linguistic conventions, Smith maintained that the formal manifestation of the virtue of justice stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of moral sentiments. This is due to the necessarily rigid rules of justice and the distinct way in which a compliance with such strict codes of conduct requires a natural process of personal interaction. Thus, while justice's utility warrants its categorisation as a virtue, its dependence on strict rules removes it from that general body of moral virtues that are so dependent on nebulous sentiments and willing human interaction.

It appears that Smith struggled to reconcile the legitimacy of institutionalised systems of justice with his premise that it is the need to give and receive sympathy as the core to human interaction. In order to rectify this conflict, Smith ultimately developed distinct categories of justice. "The first sense of the word," argues Smith, "coincides with what Aristotle and the Schoolmen call commutative justice, and with what Grotius calls the *justitia expletix*, which consists in abstaining from what is another's, and in so doing voluntarily whatever we can with propriety be forced to do".¹²² The second meaning of the word "coincides with what some have called distributive justice, and with the *justitia attributix* of Grotius, which consists in proper beneficence, in the becoming use of what is our own, and in applying it to those purposes either of charity or generosity, to which it is most suitable, in our situation, that it should be applied. In this sense justice comprehends all the social virtues".¹²³ Lastly, Smith related a final meaning that he deemed is not only more extensive than either of the former types discussed, and is present in all languages. In this sense of the word, "we are said to do injustice to a poem or a picture, when we do not admire them enough. ... In the last sense, what is called justice means the same thing with exact and perfect propriety of conduct and behaviour, and comprehends in it, not only the offices of both commutative and distributive justice, but of every other virtue, of prudence, of fortitude, of temperance."¹²⁴ This final interpretation of the meaning of justice is said to be what Plato "calls justice, and which, therefore, according to him, comprehends in it the perfection of every

¹²² Ibid., p. 269.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 269 - 270.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 270.

sort of virtue”.¹²⁵

As for the first form of justice, early in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith began to develop his characterisation of justice as something associated with civil authority. For example, in Part II, Section II Smith described the distinction between beneficence and justice. The central distinction Smith drew between the two is that beneficence is always granted freely, whereas justice “is not left to the freedom of our own wills, which may be extorted by force, and of which the violation exposes to resentment, and consequently to punishment”.¹²⁶ Actual injury and actual harm to an individual person mark this type of justice. Because the motives of such hurtful actions are naturally disapproved of, Smith argued that it is properly the object of resentment. As a result, man naturally approves of whatever measures society implements to avoid such injury and of whatever civil punishment is imposed on such violations. The perpetrator of such injustice is also keenly aware of this reality, and necessarily assumes that such measures will follow if he is found in violation of them. It is clear that this virtue, while exceedingly useful, is built not on love or affection, but upon utility.

Smith did not deny the usefulness of commutative justice, but he was quite clear in his assertion that the character of this type of justice stands in stark contrast to that of the other virtues. One of the main reasons for this is that the vast body of virtues do not lend themselves to hard and fast rules. While the “general rules of almost all the virtues, the general rules which determine what are the offices of prudence, of charity, of generosity, of gratitude, of friendship, are in many respects loose and inaccurate, admit of many exceptions, and require many modifications, that it is scarce [*sic.*] possible to regulate our conduct entirely in regard to them”.¹²⁷ Even those virtues, such as gratitude, which lend themselves to more standard notions of acceptable behaviour have thousands of exceptions corresponding to “the difference between his character and yours, between his circumstances and

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 270.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

yours". Smith continues, "[T]hose which ascertain the actions required by friendship, humanity, hospitality, generosity, are still more vague and indeterminate".¹²⁸ It is clear that this discussion is meant to contrast justice with the main body of virtues.

Agreeing with Locke, Smith noted that, unlike the other virtues, "[T]he rules of justice are accurate in the highest degree, and admit of no exceptions or modifications, but such as may be ascertained as accurately as the rules themselves, and which generally, indeed, flow from the very same principles with them. ...Though it may be awkward and pedantic, therefore, to affect too strict an adherence to the common rules of prudence or generosity, there is no pedantry in sticking fast by the rules of justice". He goes on to make the analogy that, "[T]he rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar; the rules of the other virtues, to the rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition. The one, are precise, accurate, and indispensable; the other, are loose, vague, and indeterminate, and present us rather with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible directions for acquiring it".¹²⁹ It is clear then, that while Smith may have agreed with Locke's general characteristic of justice, he did not share Locke's faith that it could serve as the guiding example in defining and setting fast rules in regard to the rest of the sentiments.

This linguistic analogy also highlights Smith's central precepts regarding the nature of moral sentiments. While the design, implementation, and goal of justice lend themselves to the hard and fast rules associated with grammar, the guiding principles with regard to the other sentiments are quite different. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the vagueness of the sentiments and the difficulty in articulating them in a clear, consistent, and cogent manner, require that their use be approached in a very different manner from that of justice. For example, the way

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 174.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 175 - 176

we learn to live by the virtue of justice is very different from that of the other sentiments: "A man may learn to write grammatically by rule, with the most absolute infallibility; and so, perhaps, he may be taught to act justly. But there are no rules whose observance will infallibly lead us to the attainment of elegance or the sublime in writing; though there are some which may help us, in some measure, correct and ascertain the vague ideas which we might otherwise have entertained of those perfections. And there are no rules by the knowledge of which we can infallibly be taught to act upon all occasions with prudence, with just magnanimity, or proper beneficence: though there are some which may enable us to correct and ascertain, in several respects, the imperfect ideas which we might otherwise have entertained of those virtues".¹³⁰ It is clear that learning the 'rules' for being just is far less demanding and more straight forward than is mastery of all the other virtues; for these elude such straightforward governance. The most we can possibly hope for because of the vast majority of sentiments, and in contrast to justice, is "[T]o describe, in general manner, what is the ordinary way of acting which each virtue would prompt us. ... It is, indeed, scarce possible to describe the internal sentiment or emotion upon which it is founded, without doing something of this kind. It is impossible by language to express, if I may say so, the invisible features of all the different modifications of passion as they show themselves within".¹³¹

Expanding on these premises, Smith later in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* returned again to this distinction between the rules governing justice as being comparable to the rules of grammar, and the 'rules' governing the other virtues more comparable to standards "which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition, and which present us rather with general ideas of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible direction for acquiring it". Smith went directly on to assert that, "[A]s the different rules of morality admit such different degrees of accuracy, those authors who have

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 176.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 329.

endeavoured to collect and digest them into a system have done it in two different manners; and one set has followed through the whole that loose method to which they were naturally directed by the consideration of one species of virtues; while another has as universally endeavoured to introduce into their precepts the sort of accuracy of which only some of them are susceptible. The first have wrote like critics, the second like grammarians".¹³² Therefore, the first type is characterised as being held by all the ancient moralists, who focused on describing the general manner of the different virtues and vices, but made no attempt to lay down precise rules. While there may be basic premises of conduct which allow us to identify our distinct sentiments, "[I]t is impossible, indeed, to express all the variations which each sentiment either does or ought to undergo, according to every possible variations of circumstances. They are endless, and language wants names to mark them by".¹³³ It is thus through the exploration of the concept of justice, and by contrasting it to the main body of virtues, that Smith most clearly demonstrated the major premises of his theory.

Smith highlighted the chasm between commutative justice and the vast majority of moral sentiments in other ways as well. Smith asserted that "[I]n treating of the rules of morality, in this manner, consists the science which is properly called Ethics, a science which, though like criticism it does not admit of the most accurate precision, is, however, both highly useful and agreeable".¹³⁴ This stands in sharp contrast to a second type of moralist, characterised by the middle and latter stages of the Christian church, as well as the natural jurists, who

¹³² Ibid., p. 327.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 328.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 329

endeavour to lay down exact rules to govern human behaviour. Smith notes that, “justice is the only virtue with regard to which such exact rules can properly be given”.¹³⁵

It is interesting to note that whereas virtue of justice requires a set of rules that are not dependent on the mechanism of sympathy; this fact has a profound effect on how this virtue manifests itself in society. As justice does not depend on a willing exchange of sentiments, it represents an artificial construct within the sympathetic system. While commutative justice may be necessary, its independence from the general pool of social bonds that are created through the willing exchange of sentiments has dramatic consequences on both its virtuous nature and on those who violate it. While we still share the resentment of someone to whom a wrong has been done and believe that he or she has a right to have that wrong corrected, the process by which we come to this state of sympathetic reaction is distinct from Smith’s general theory of moral sentiments.

This is due to the fact that, in contrast to the other sentiments, the virtue of justice relates to man as a fellow member of a larger societal collective, not as an individual character. As a result, the virtue of justice has its basis in our character as citizens concerned with the greater good, not in us as individuals who feel an affinity toward our fellow man. In order to act justly, we act in a manner contrary to the vast majority of our sentiments in order to meet the requirements of the virtue of justice. For example, Smith noted that even if an odious person is dealt an injustice, we enter into resentment if there was no provocation. Smith likewise cited the example of a sentinel who falls asleep on watch, which at the time was considered a capital crime. “The natural atrocity of the crime seems so little,” notes Smith “and the punishment so great, that it is with great difficulty that our heart can

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 330.

reconcile itself to it".¹³⁶ Yet we realise that the severity of the punishment does not rest in the individual's action so much as in the greater good which his actions have jeopardised.

While there are some acts, such as murder or parricide, that draw upon quite instinctive sentiments which lead us to conclude that they are in violation of the rules of justice, there are also a large number of other rules of justice which seem, at first blush, to be unjust until their contribution to social cohesion and social utility are taken into account. For example, in the case of the odious character or the relatively innocent failing of the sentinel, we are forced to go against the grain of the vast majority of our sentiments in order to apply the proper rules of justice. Though Smith admitted that this presents a conflict and that it may taint our judgement to some degree, he is confident that this ambivalence "does not in this case altogether prevent our fellow-feeling with his natural indignation; though with those who are not either extremely candid, or who have not been accustomed to correct and regulate their natural sentiments by general rules, it is very apt to damp it".¹³⁷ It is clear that Smith realised that our sentiments must at times be transgressed if we are to fulfil the goals of justice.

Commutative justice also stands in stark contrast to the other virtues because, as characterised by Smith, justice is a 'negative virtue' in that its breach deserves punishment, but its observance does not warrant any reward. This is very much a characterisation of the virtue of justice as positive law, in that justice is a 'virtue' that serves only to prevent one from doing actual harm to another member of society. Therefore, one can "fulfil all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing".¹³⁸ Thus, the rules governing this virtue require no interaction at all; one can merely keep to oneself. Unlike the great majority of virtues whose refinement,

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

and very existence, rely on social interaction and conversation, Smith saw the strict rules of justice as exerting their influence and control over us irrespective of any inter-communication or action.

This severance of commutative justice from the other virtues is brought home, in turn, in relation to the inapplicability of the rules of justice when judging our internal sentiments. Smith is quite explicit in asserting that the rules of justice cannot be used to pass judgement on our other internal sentiments for otherwise “sentiments, thoughts, intentions, would become the objects of punishment; and if the indignation of mankind run as high against them as against actions; if the baseness of the thought which had given birth to no action, seemed in the eyes of the world as much to call aloud for vengeance as the baseness of the action, every court of judicature would become a real inquisition.”¹³⁹

Thus, whilst actions are to be punished:

Sentiments, designs, affections, though it is from these that according to cool reason human actions derive their whole merit or demerit, are placed by the great Judge of hearts beyond the limits of every human jurisdiction, and are reserved for the cognisance of his own unerring tribunal. That necessarily rule of justice, therefore, that men in this life are liable to punishment for their actions only, not for their designs and intentions, is founded upon this salutary and useful irregularity in human sentiments concerning merit or demerit, which at first sight appears so absurd and unaccountable.¹⁴⁰

It becomes clear at this point that Smith attempted to isolate justice as a unique, though necessary, element of society, and one which must necessarily operate in its own sphere of influence. Due to the unique character of commutative justice, it has a binding effect beyond our personal sentiments and, unlike other sentiments, acts outside our control. Further, due to universal approbation of the premises of justice, force may “be made use of to constrain us to observe the rules of the one,

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

but not to follow the precepts of the others”.¹⁴¹ Here we see that Smith distinguished between the *rules* of justice, and the *precepts* that command all our other sentiments. While essential, in no way should the former be allowed to transgress the latter, for they are both essential, yet completely distinct, elements of social cohesion.

As a result of this distinction, Smith seems to have contended that the sympathetic mechanism, although primary to man’s character, is not a factor in the development of commutative justice. This distinction has a dramatic effect on the manifestation of our sentiments in relation to justice. For example, Smith was confident that “[T]he violator of the more sacred laws of justice can never reflect on the sentiments which mankind must entertain with regard to him, without feeling all the agonies of shame, and horror, and consternation”.¹⁴² After the violation of the rules of justice, when the individual has the opportunity to calmly reflect on his or her actions; “[T]hey appear now as detestable to him as they did always to other people. By sympathising with the hatred and abhorrence which other men must entertain for him, he becomes in some measure the object of his own hatred and abhorrence”.¹⁴³ Feeling self-pity and regret, he has a keen awareness of the appropriateness of society’s scorn, resentment, and punishment. As Smith stated, “[T]he thought of this perpetually haunts him, and fills him with terror and amazement. He dares no longer look society in the face, but imagines himself as it were rejected, and thrown out from the affections of all mankind”. Most importantly, “[H]e cannot hope for the consolation of sympathy in this his greatest moment of dreadful distress. The remembrance of his crimes has shut out all fellow feeling with him from the hearts of his fellow-creatures. The sentiments which they entertain with regard to him, are the very thing which he is most afraid of”.¹⁴⁴ Smith continued that while such an individual might feel that his best option is to flee away from society into some ‘inhospitable desert’, the solitude that he

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

would encounter there would be more dreadful than anything he could face from his fellows. Given this, he has no other option but to come “again into the presence of mankind, astonished to appear before them, loaded with shame and distracted with fear, in order to supplicate some little protection from the countenance of those very judges, who he knows have already all unanimously condemned him. Such is the nature of that sentiment, which is properly called remorse; of all the sentiments which can enter the human breast the most dreadful”.¹⁴⁵ (See Appendix B) This quote highlights the sentimental ramifications caused by the artifice of commutative justice. Separated from the other virtues by the lack of dependence on the medium of sympathy, those who run afoul of the rules of justice are likewise separated from the sympathetic support of others. Yet the artifice of justice does not prevent the individuals themselves from reflecting on their actions and feeling an irrepressible need to share sentiments of shame with their fellow man. When these individuals most are in need of personal connection with others, when they are most painfully aware of their trespasses due to their sentiments, it is at this time that those sentiments cannot be conveyed.

The reason for this incongruity is the dominating artificial construct of justice and its associated rules. Since the institution of justice is apart from the sympathetic mechanism, the individuals who have both violated the rules of justice, and affronted the sentiments created within the society around that transgression, are likewise isolated. They not only lack the ability to participate in the willing modification and exchange of the sentiments through the medium of sympathy, but have also violated the ‘artificial’ foundation of justice on which that exchange is accommodated within a society. Smith appeared to have lamented that, while utilitarian and necessary, the sacrifice justice requires, the separation from the sentiments it demands, is a great one. Hence, while justice may be the greatest virtue, the price paid at an emotional level for its transgression, remorse, is judged by Smith to be the most dreadful of all the sentiments.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 84 - 85.

What we come to recognise is that, in Smith's opinion, commutative justice does not represent a connection with our fellows, but rather was portrayed by him as an 'appropriate' conflict with the wishes of others. Hence, proper resentment at injustice "can justify our hurting or disturbing in any respect the happiness of our neighbour".¹⁴⁶ This friction with our fellows manifests itself in no virtue but justice, and on its face seems the antithesis of all the more noble aspects of the human character. Only when it is seen for what it is, the bedrock of a functioning society, can this greatest of social artifices be brought into our breasts and acted upon.

The movement of the sentiments associated with justice are characterised as being quite different from that of the attempt to gain positive sympathy. Smith immediately went on to discuss the fact that "[T]he opposite behaviour naturally inspires the opposite sentiment".¹⁴⁷ The man who intentionally does a generous action feels himself to be the natural object of love and admiration, and "by sympathy with them, of the esteem and approbation of all mankind".¹⁴⁸ In such a case, even when he adopts the position of the impartial spectator, he still enters into it, and "applauds himself by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed impartial judge". Due to this correlation both internally and externally, he finds himself, "in friendship and harmony with all mankind, and looks upon his fellow-creatures with confidence and benevolent satisfaction, secure that he has rendered himself worthy of their most favourable regards".¹⁴⁹ Removed from the artifice of commutative justice, the more natural exchange of sentiments characterised here represents the harmonious interaction and balance that result from the vast majority of sentiments. Here it would seem the impartial spectator acts both naturally and more willingly.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

It would seem that, while Smith would wish that all men could act at the noble level of the more nuanced virtues, he does not think that we can depend on people to do so. As a result, Smith maintained that we must necessarily have a system in place to ensure that a minimum level of social cohesion and predictability is maintained in society. While virtuous behaviour is to be encouraged and is the “ornament which embellishes” the social structure, Smith maintained that justice is “the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seem in this world, if I may say so, to have been the peculiar and darling care of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms”.¹⁵⁰ This is because without some sense of justice, man would care so much for his own interests, and so little for that of others, as to render him unfit to function in a social context at all. While beneficence makes life more comfortable, society can exist without it; yet without justice society would be utterly destroyed. Still, it would appear that Smith wished that it were otherwise, and only reluctantly embraced the rules of justice out of social necessity.

However, perhaps in an effort to reconcile the apparent conflict between commutative justice and the other sentiments, Smith presented the reader with another form of justice, one much more in keeping with the general thrust of his interpretation of the moral sentiments. Citing Grotius, Smith believed that there is another, more comprehensive, concept of justice that is most accurately associated with the idea of *justitia attributrix*, also known as distributive justice. In contrast to Aristotle, however, who argued that distributive justice related to the proper distribution of rewards from the public stock of a given community, Smith gave his interpretation of justice a much more personal meaning. As noted at the start of this section, Smith maintained that distributive justice is associated with coming to an understanding “of what is our own, and in applying it to those purposes either of charity or generosity, to which it is most suitable, in our situation, that it should be

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

applied”.¹⁵¹ In this sense of the word, “we are said not to do justice to our neighbour unless we conceive for him all that love, respect, and esteem, which his character, his situation, and his connexion with ourselves, render suitable and proper for us to feel, and unless we act accordingly. It is in this sense that we are said to do injustice to a man of merit who is connected with us, though we abstain from hurting him in every respect, if we do not exert ourselves to serve him and to place him in that situation in which the impartial spectator would be pleased to see him”.¹⁵²

From this characterisation, ‘distributive justice’ is the ability to relate to each person we encounter based on his or her individual situation. While this is a core premise of Smith’s moral theory more generally, it stands in sharp contrast to the discussion of commutative justice that dominates Smith’s writings on the nature of justice. However, distributive justice is much more in keeping with Smith’s general contentions regarding the sentiments, and is thus characterised as comprehending all the social virtues. While only mentioned in passing, this conception of justice reflects Smith’s major contention that the pursuit of virtue involves self-perfection and the refinement of our individual characters to their greatest social good.

Lastly, there is a closely associated meaning of justice, cited by Smith, which builds on his general theory and also “runs ... through all languages”.¹⁵³ It is the ability to discern between the nuances of objects, to judge them in a manner that is fitting, and respond in such a way as an impartial spectator would approve. Based upon standards of taste, this sense of justice compels the individual to judge whether an object is proper and befitting its particular purpose in a particular setting. Also these assume that there are no precise or necessarily correct judgements in such cases, and thus allow a range of nuance and acceptable responses. However, once again, we see that this description stands at odds with

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 270.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 269.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 270.

the general tenor of Smith's discussion of justice. This broader conception of justice, for Smith, is related to taste, involves interaction and personal judgement, and, therefore, is inherently repugnant to the imposition of hard and fast rules.

It is hard to know whether these alternative interpretations of the meaning of justice are merely an attempt to explain away common usage outside of its more institutionalised form, or perhaps to bring the virtue of justice somehow within the scope of the other virtues. What is clear, however, is that these more rigid forms of justice were not the primary focus in Smith's writings. Rather, the focus of Smith's attention was the role of justice in its commutative form. As such, it was seen as not only essential, but also as very much distinct and removed from the main body of the sentiments. Whilst its great utility might have brought it soundly into the highest realm of virtue, the artificial constructs which created that foundation also walled off its function from man's more natural sentiments. Consequently, Smith was willing to admit that it is essential for justice to exist and that its unusual manifestation be justified and explained. But he is in no way inclined to go farther than this. Thus, like Hume, Smith believed that without justice we could not express our other sentiments. However, once the foundation of commutative justice is laid and secured, it is the two broader conceptions of justice, as we shall see, that come to be the central focus of Smith's discussion of how we master the communication of our moral sentiments. Unlike commutative justice, these concepts of justice are intricately tied to the vast body of our natural sentiments. Central to these latter forms of 'doing justice' is the consideration of our own situation in order that we can use this resource in such a manner as to accentuate and maximise our own personal realisation. It is these skills which we must develop if we are to make this a reality and to which we turn in the following chapter.

8. Conclusions and Conflicts

Having reviewed the structure of Smith's argument, the relationship between his theory and contemporary theoretical assumptions relating to language and language use becomes evident. The discussion of language and language use by such as Locke, Mandeville, Condillac, and Rousseau in the first half of the century and Adam Smith's later elaboration of the formation of moral sentiments all sought an understanding of how and why man first made a purposeful effort to express himself to another individual. The roots of this process, in both cases, was seen as arising most inadvertently in man's natural reaction to either joy or pain, and the universality of that experience. From this beginning arose the next step, the intentional effort to make this connection on command. In order for this to occur, in both cases a system of communication with which people could interact was necessary. For this to be achieved, the ability to exchange thoughts necessitated a common medium by which to communicate; namely, by mutually recognised and acceptable signs relating to a particular object, had to be created within a given society. This in turn required individuals to learn the correct use of signs through experience, to recall the correct usage through reflection, and to adjust those signs using reason - all of which were themselves developed and refined in order to carry out this task

But as regards the passions, which started off this whole communication process in all the linguistic theories discussed, their role, beyond that instinctive stage at the dawn of inter-communication, took on dramatically different forms. And in each case, the role assigned to the passions did not fit into Smith's conception of the transmission of moral sentiments. It is at this point that Smith and the contemporary assumptions about the origin and evolution of language parted company, and Smith was left on his own to struggle with finding a workable scheme for the formation of moral sentiments. For example, as we saw in the first chapter, Locke was able to address the difficulty of the expression of abstract

sentiments by adopting a conception of language in which all conceptions of the mind, no matter how simple or complex, could be defined, labelled and communicated. Smith simply did not accept that it was as simple as this, and even when forming his general rules, realised that the passions, at best, can be only loosely defined. Smith in the end was not willing to go so far as to assume that all the passions could be categorised and neatly defined so as to accommodate their communication. While Smith might have agreed with Locke's reasoning when it came to justice, it is clear that as regards the other passions, Locke's theory did not, for Smith, adequately address the problem of communicating the passions.

To Mandeville the early emotional cries were the springboard of communication, but not the purpose behind language. By specifically dismissing communication of the passions as the reason why people converse with one another, in favour of the desire to persuade, he clearly distanced himself from the kind of argument presented by Smith. While Smith is very much in agreement with Mandeville as to the seminal position of persuasion in communication, and indeed as to how effective persuasion is to be achieved, he does not share in Mandeville's contention that communication came about purely to persuade and was not created to express the passions. Smith requires that man do more than just cajole and manipulate; man must also convey a sentiment clearly, accurately and honestly. To Smith, the element of persuasion was merely a means of achieving the goal that Mandeville dismissed, namely, the expression of a passion to another person. While Mandeville allowed man the freedom to use whatever means were at his disposal to achieve the goal of engaging in the communicative act, Smith's use of persuasion was necessarily limited in that it must at all time remain truthful to the individual's desire to share the sentiment he is experiencing at the time.

As noted earlier in the chapter, to Condillac the passions were the origin of inter-personal communication, and the passions were depicted as continuing to have a role in linguistic development. Critically though, he did not maintain that we can reflect on the passions while we are experiencing them. In addition, given

his understanding of the manner in which man reasons, Condillac did not seem to think that we have immediate control over our passions. If this is an accurate portrayal of how we process our passions, then it follows that we cannot be experiencing, reflecting, comparing, modifying and transmitting all of our sentiments at the same time as Smith appeared to argue is possible. Condillac was equally dubious that, due to the infinite permutations of the passions and a lack of signs to express every nuance of those passions, men are forced to use only general terms and broad rules to categorise them. This was particularly troubling in the effort to define such concepts as virtue and vice. Thus, while Condillac would seem to have concurred with the way Smith presented the general formation of the 'rules' governing moral sentiments, Condillac would appear to have little faith in the success of Smith's more general project.

Likewise, Rousseau also saw the desire to express the passions as the root of language; but he had little faith that its development and refinement enabled a more effective means of the communication of sentiments to be created. Rousseau in fact considered the use of reason and reflection to guide moral judgements as a huge hindrance to true personal fulfilment. To him the expression of the sentiments via language represented, if anything, a dulling of the core passions, and allowed man in society a way to justify his unwillingness to connect with his fellow man.

It becomes apparent, then, that both Condillac and Rousseau were unwilling to link their observations on the central role of the passions in stimulating the creation of language to any conclusions regarding man's moral character. The difficulties surrounding the passions once language had progressed was considered very problematic by Condillac, and seen as negative by Rousseau. In so doing, they also effectively isolated its use in any extended explanation of the nature and progress of the formation of moral sentiments via a linguistic analysis.

Unlike Condillac and Rousseau, Smith needed to address directly the problematic area of the relationship between the core elements driving the development of interpersonal communication and morality. In doing so, Smith moved away from many of the communal assumptions about language maintained by Hume and toward use of references to language and language use that emphasised the need to formulate an internalised standard of morality. While both based their conceptions of the sentiments on the idea of sympathy, Hume's conception of the role of language in the formation of moral sentiments was quite different. To Hume, linguistic convention played a significant role in moulding the moral character of a social group, and it was the goal of an individual coming into that social group to learn and adopt these standards. Due to Smith's conviction in the nebulous nature of the sentiments, and the inherent limitations of language to enshrine them, he seems to have been unwilling to portray language as the vessel by which the moral character of man is carried and shaped.

It becomes apparent, then, that with regard to the expression of the passions in society, there is great discord among the various theorists as to the role of the passions. The difficulties surrounding the passions once language had progressed was marginal by Locke, considered a non-issue by Mandeville, considered problematic by Condillac, seen as negative by Rousseau, and seen as established based on utility and social convention as evidenced in social constructed acceptable linguistic usage by Hume. Unfortunately for Smith, however, none of these options were open to him. He had placed the inherent difficulty in the communication of sentiments at the very centre of his theory, and was forced to deal head on with all of its implications and inherent conflicts.

Smith attempted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to present the formation of moral sentiments as a social construct, but this effort involved the application of such concepts as the passions, sympathy, and moral judgement; abstractions that he deemed, by their very nature, eluded being moulded into clearly definable social

constructs as evidenced in language itself. This inevitably brought about the dilemma faced by Smith throughout the entire length of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, of reconciling the conflict between the desire to gain sympathy, and the 'man in the breast.' In the end, Smith spends much of his time trying to strike a balance between these two elements, and was forced to argue them both, always reminding the reader, when discussing one, of its conflict with the other.

Given the inherent weaknesses in the communication of the sentiments made evident by Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith had to take these limitations into consideration when formulating his theory for how we develop and refine our moral sentiments. What Smith believed we must strive for is proficiency in the use of the available medium of language - at least as far as that limited instrument will allow. As noted earlier, in discussing the lack of perfectibility in relation to the sentiments, Smith referred to the fine arts, and that the closer one comes to a refinement in that field, the more one realises that they are lacking. Yet, even given this realisation, "the conduct and conversation of a whole life to some resemblance of this ideal perfection, is surely much more difficult than to work up to and equal resemblance any of the productions of any of the ingenious arts".¹⁵⁴ Having relinquished the idea that we can ever truly become complete masters of the expression of our moral sentiments, Smith resigns himself to the fact that the most we can ever do is work toward that ideal; and do so by refining and developing a command of our skills in the communication of those sentiments. In the face of the struggle to convey sympathy to those around us, we know that: "[S]ociety and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquillity, if, at any time, it has unfortunately lost it; as well as the best preservatives of that equal and happy temper, which is so necessary to self-satisfaction and enjoyment".¹⁵⁵ As we will see in the following chapter, for Smith,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

the goal was the refinement of individual expression of the sentiments, and the tools of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory were valuable in order to maximise this process.

CHAPTER IV

Rhetoric and Adam Smith's Conception of the Communication of Sympathy and the Refinement of Moral Sentiments

As we witnessed in the previous chapter, Smith did not share Hume's faith in the ability of linguistic convention to reflect the moral universe of a given community. While the communication of the sentiments mirrors the origin and development of language and language use, and indeed plays a crucial role in that development, linguistic convention itself is not portrayed by Smith as playing a central role in developing our moral character, as was the case with Hume. This is due in large part to Smith's insistence that the nuanced nature of the sentiments simply rendered linguistic convention incapable embodying with any degree or certainty all the multifarious shades associated with the sentiments.¹

This does not mean, however, that language did not play a crucial role in the formulation of Smith's theory of moral sentiments. While Smith did not agree that general language usage led an individual to an understanding of particular society's moral standards, Smith certainly did see the conscious use of language it as the key to unlocking these standards. Through the command of language, and the ability to make one's oral expressions fit as closely as possible to our individual character and sentiments, each person within society can come to maximise their sympathetic interaction through the mastery of language. For while general rules of morality lay an essential foundation to our development, much like grammar rules are essential to language, it is the effort to put these general premises into action with 'elegance and sublimity', associated with the development of style, that is a central tenet of Smith's theory of moral sentiments.

¹ Smith noted, "No words are sufficient to convey an adequate idea of their [the passions] effect", Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture 16, p.87; and that "It would be endless, because tho the simple passions are of no great number, yet these are so compounded in different manners as to make a number of mixt ones almost infinite." Lectures on Jurisprudence, p. 69.

It must be remembered that Smith's conception of morals revolved around man's need to communicate effectively with other individuals in order to solicit sympathy from his fellows. To facilitate and develop this skill, the study of rhetoric was judged by Smith to be the most useful tool for achieving this goal. This fact is evidenced by John Millar's explanation that Smith, his former teacher, chose to emphasise in his lectures the proposition that, "[T]he best method of explaining and illustrating the various powers of the human mind, the most useful part of metaphysics, arises from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the principles of literary compositions which contribute to persuasion or entertainments".² Reflecting the surge in interest in belletristic rhetoric amongst the emerging urban commercial class during this period, Smith advocated the refinement of belletristic rhetoric as a tool of social and moral refinement. It is Smith's contention that it is through the refinement of these rhetorical skills that we can most effectively come to control and develop our moral sentiments. By adapting contemporary rhetorical trends to his theory of moral sentiments, Smith provides a prime example of the effort among some of the major Scottish theorists of the period to merge their epistemological assumptions into operable, socially based, theories of moral refinement.

1. Adam Smith and Rhetoric: A Lifelong Curiosity

Adam Smith demonstrated a lifelong interest in the study of both rhetoric and moral theory. As a result, Smith's understandings of moral sentiments and the nature of rhetoric not only appears to have evolved along side each other, but also at times became so interwoven as to be almost indistinguishable. The delineation of these two spheres is made all the more difficult, since references to the relationship between rhetoric and morals exists in the form of *obiter dicta* scattered

² Dugald Stewart, Account of the Life and Writing of Adam Smith, LL.D., originally published: London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1795. Reproduced in: W.L.D. Wightman (ed.), Essays on Philosophical Subjects, I. 16.

throughout all Smith's works. This section will attempt to establish that, even though not systematically presented, rhetoric played a central role in Smith's characterisation of moral sentiments.

Ironically, Smith's rhetorical legacy can be gleaned only from his other works and the writings of others. He never published his lectures on rhetoric and belle lettres, and the only known manuscript dealing directly with rhetoric was among those destroyed by his strict instructions the week before his death.³ If any other original first-hand writings did ever exist, they have been lost. So when one refers to 'Smith's rhetoric' or quote his lectures, we are in fact citing student notes or references to rhetorical thinking found in his works on other subjects.⁴

The historic evidence, though, is unequivocal in its testament to Smith's lifelong interest and involvement in the dissemination of eighteenth-century rhetoric. Smith began his career at the age of 26, just two years out of Oxford, lecturing on rhetoric and belle lettres.⁵ He presented these lectures on the subject of writing and asserted that clear and concise writing was a culturally desirable goal, particularly in Scotland.⁶ These lectures were well-attended over the two-year period that they were taught, and as a result of their popularity, Smith was offered the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Glasgow in 1751, and the next year

³ See, Adam Smith Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, ed. J.C. Bryce (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) p. 1.

⁴ In 1961 John M. Lothian, Reader (later titular Professor) in English in the University of Aberdeen announced his discovery, at an Aberdeenshire manor-house library in 1958, of two volumes of manuscript notes 'Notes of Dr. Smith's Rhetoric Lectures,' reported by a student in 1762 - 1763. For a more detailed description of the interesting facts surrounding this discovery, see, Smith, 'Introduction,' Lectures on Rhetoric, pp. 1 - 7.

⁵ 'Rhetoric,' at this point can be loosely defined as the science of effective communication. 'Belle lettres,' as the literature of the imagination and passions. And 'belletristic rhetoricians,' as those concerning themselves explicitly with the rhetoric function of language.

⁶ Kurt Heinzelman, "The Last Georgic: Wealth of Nations and the Scene of Writing", Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essays, ed. Steven Copley and Kathryn Sutherland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) p. 172.

moved to the Chair of Moral Philosophy.⁷ It is thought that these initial lectures on rhetoric were then incorporated into his teaching in these other disciplines, as well as a separate course, in the years 1752 - 1763.

The original appointment as a lecturer on rhetoric, which launched Smith's teaching career, did not come by pure chance. "It seems likely," Lothian surmises, "that his friends considered that for his native bias of taste and his prolonged literary studies that he was the natural choice."⁸ Due to his study under Francis Hutcheson at Glasgow and his six years at Oxford, Smith's "awareness of the language as an activity" made him a natural for the role.⁹ It was this awareness which came to play a central role in his formulation of the nature of moral sentiments. His interest in rhetoric also extended into his activities as a member of various Edinburgh societies. For example, Smith was on the Select Society's 'Committee for Belle Lettres and Criticism,' and was best known among its ranks as a literary critic.¹⁰

The copies of the student notes which make up *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* (hereafter, *Lectures on Rhetoric*) were written between 1762 and 1763, and appear to be the work of two of Smith's students who collaborated to make the notes as accurate an account of Smith's words as possible.¹¹ These notes lay the foundation of our understanding of Smith's conception of rhetoric in relative isolation. This grounding in rhetoric was yet further advanced when in 1764 Charles Townshend employed Smith as the travelling tutor to his step-son, the young Duke of Buccleuch. Spending the next three years in France, Smith became steeped in French drama and literary theory, expanding his already existing interest in French rhetoric and philosophy.

⁷ Dorothy C. Broadus, *Moral Sense Theory In the History of Rhetoric* (Louisville: University of Louisville Press, 1989) p. 53.

⁸ John M. Lothain's, "Introduction" to *Lectures on Rhetoric*, cited by Thomas P. Miller, "Eighteenth-Century Scottish Rhetoric in its Socio-Cultural Context," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Texas, 1984) p. 48.

⁹ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 7.

¹⁰ John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (Bristol: Thoemmes Antiquarian Books, 1990) p. 116.

¹¹ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 4.

The influence of rhetoric on Smith's thinking is evident during the remainder of his career and was a focus of his scholarship right up to the time of his death. Henry Mackenzie wrote to a Mr. Carmichael in 1783 that Smith, "has lying by him, several essays, some finished, but the greater part not quite completed on subjects of criticism and belle lettres, which, when he chooses to put them to the world, will, I am confident, nowise derogate from his former reputation as an author."¹² These essays appear to have related to Smith's lectures on the history of the sciences and arts, as well as on rhetoric and belles lettres.¹³ Unfortunately, these works never came to fruition and were destroyed, at Smith's behest, shortly before his death.

While Smith's personal history clearly demonstrated that he was deeply involved in the development and dissemination of rhetorical principles throughout his life, we are still confronted with a less than clear history of his actual thoughts on the subject. Our most isolated historical evidence of Smith's views on rhetoric clearly comes from the student notes. Even if we assume that the note takers who penned the *Lectures on Rhetoric* are as reliable as if the author himself penned it, the simple fact of when the notes were taken greatly impedes our efforts to examine Smith's rhetorical thinking in isolation. The lectures that make up *Lectures on Rhetoric* apparently date from the fifteenth year which Adam Smith lectured on Rhetoric.¹⁴ As J. C. Bryce notes, "[W]hat modifications the lectures on rhetoric underwent between 1748 and the session which our notes were taken is almost impossible to determine."¹⁵ However, for our purposes, it is important to note that Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* had already been published when the student's notes were penned and the text of the *Lectures on Rhetoric* reveals that

¹² William R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Co., 1937) p.284.

¹³ Herbert W. Schneider, "Biographical Guide," *Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy*, London: Harper and Row, 1970, p. xxvi.. An Advertisement by the editors of these essays in 1795 stated, "[W]hen these were inspected, the greater number of them appeared to be part of a plan he once had formed, for giving a connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts. It is long since he found it necessary to abandon that plan as far too extensive; and these parts of it lay beside him neglected until his death." (Black and Hutton, "Advertisement," V, [51 - 52], London, 1795).

¹⁴ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the amalgamation of Smith's theory of moral sentiments and those of rhetoric had already taken place.

As we will see below, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* a myriad of correlations are drawn between rhetorical subjects and those of Smith's conclusions on the nature of human sentiments. Thankfully, rather than serving as a barrier to the deciphering of Smith's observations on rhetoric, this at times almost impenetrable mixture of the two reveals much more than it conceals in the end. For by examining the interaction between Smith's rhetorical thinking and his discussion of moral sentiments, we discover how one served to advance the other.

2. British Empiricism, Rhetoric and Adam Smith

The first area we will investigate is the relationship between empiricism and rhetoric in mid-eighteenth-century Scotland, which was marked by the abandonment in rhetorical theory of reason, in favour of observation as the basis of judgement. As a result of this transition, it became critical for both empiricists and rhetoricians to formulate new theories as to what criteria of observation should be followed. For example, it was natural for those interested in the empirical method to look to rhetorical tools of judging aesthetics as the building blocks of their own standards of observation. The preoccupation of the belletristic rhetoricians with the judgement of observations of beauty and taste was seen as giving insight into how humans perceived and judged both their environment and each other. In turn, the systematisation, universality, and neutrality sought by the empirical method intrigued the rhetoricians. It was hoped that the lessons learned from empiricism could be adapted to the rhetorical concern with beauty and taste, and could be utilised to formulate universal rules of aesthetics. Due to their mutual concern following the rhetorician's rejection of pure reason by formulating new criteria for judging the nature of observation, a process of interaction and exchange began between them. In this section we will discuss this interaction, starting first with the implications on the 'science of man', and then turning our focus to rhetoric.

While at face value, the empirical method pursued by the 'science of man' appears to be, if anything, completely repugnant to rhetorical principles, we will see that the Scottish Enlightenment discourse on human nature was in fact profoundly influenced by rhetorical principles. As noted in Chapter II, though Hume who pioneered the 'science of man' never formally defined the notion, there is no difficulty in identifying their concern in taking a systematic investigation of human nature parallel in rigour and comprehensiveness to the investigation of the natural world to be found in the works of such men as Boyle and Newton. The study of nature and the study of man were considered by the Scots to be two parts of the same discipline. It was their paramount goal to establish an understanding of human nature that would parallel the certainty and methodological soundness attributed to the natural sciences. In order to achieve this goal, moral philosophers of the period adopted the scientific method of analysis and synthesis and adapted it to moral subjects. It was their contention that the 'science of man' like the 'science of nature' ultimately rested on observation and experience that would, given sufficient data, establish a causal relationship between the principles of nature and observable phenomena. In the case of the 'science of man' this entailed establishing a causal relationship between the principles of human nature and man's cultural achievements.

The epistemological primacy of sensory data assumed by the science of man, and the conclusions that could be drawn from such observations, seems on the face of it to be hostile to rhetoric. It would appear that the adoption of the empirical method was, if anything, an attempt to purge the pursuit of moral philosophy of the tainting influence of rhetorical influences. Since the time of Plato, rhetoric was oftentimes labelled by philosophers as something inferior, dishonest, and having no concern for truth but only the semblance of truth.¹⁶ Certainly, by the nineteenth century, rhetoric had a pejorative meaning, suggesting underhanded tricks, fraud,

¹⁶ Samuel Ijsseling, Rhetoric and Philosophy In Conflict (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976) p. 86.

and deceit.¹⁷ But to assume this, is to make fundamental errors as to the nature of both the 'science of man' and rhetoric in eighteenth-century Scotland.

Empiricism during the eighteenth century was part of a larger literary and philosophical culture in a way that modern empiricism is not. Theorists during this period did not draw sharp distinctions between 'science' and 'philosophy.' For example, often in the work of Smith the two terms are used almost interchangeably. In his works, morality, sympathy and imagination are all illustrated with reference to belletristic rhetoric. Conversely, he grounds his belletristic rhetoric in human psychology and explains and evaluates it in terms of human nature. The 'limits' of science and the 'limits' of philosophy were the frontiers which were under investigation. Until such time as these boundaries were finally established, the recourse to the techniques of other disciplines was completely valid. In the effort to discover the core of human nature, any methods open to investigation were pursued. With their roots in philosophy, rhetoric, or science, in the new pursuit of the 'science of man', old concepts utilised under the scrutiny of the new empirical method were all potentially conceived as shedding light on man's nature.

A good example of this trans-disciplinary interaction is the interplay between rhetoric and philosophy due to the necessary methodological changes precipitated by the displacement of 'pure reason' as the basis of philosophical thought during the Scottish Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century the Scots shifted away from thinkers of the French Enlightenment such as Diderot, who had sought complete final and exclusive understanding of all that there is by way of philosophical reflection based on reason and independent of other enquiries, and adopted the empirical method whose aim was to base judgement on actual experience and observable phenomena. This rejection of, as Hume put it, "reasoning purely philosophical",¹⁸ marked a fundamental alteration in how the study of man's nature was to be pursued.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁸ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 184.

With the rejection of pure reason, the Scots turned their attention to the empirical premises of experience and induction. Scottish empiricism was preoccupied with the observer and with investigating the principles of the mind by which one was led to understand and believe what one observed.¹⁹ As a result of this shift in the locus of knowledge, the Scots were also confronted with the problem of how to methodise and understand observation and reflection. For while the “ideas of sensation” were at the forefront of this new methodology which the Scots hoped to replicate, there was necessarily correlated with this the equally important “ideas of reflection and judgement”.²⁰ It is here that we find the core to the rhetorical element of Scottish empiricism. As Jules D. Law notes, “[f]or in that confrontation with the sensory world that constitutes the central drama of empiricist writing, language and sensation (particularly visual perception) are inextricably, in fact dialectically, related ... the empirical characterisation of perceptual knowledge is articulated explicitly in the form of linguistic distinctions.”²¹ It is the empiricist task of perception and processing of data which is the key here, for as soon as one begins to comment on proper response to observations, rhetorical principles of judgement necessarily enter the picture. For the empiricist the “account of what we see is inseparable from an account of what we say”.²²

This need on the part of the empiricists for a standard by which observations could be characterised coincided with a shift in the concept of perception in the field of rhetoric during the mid-eighteenth century; a shift which itself marked a movement away from reasoning and toward a reliance on observation. Smith appears to have followed the shift in French rhetoric away from an emphasis on cognition and toward an insistence upon the importance of sensory stimulation in generating effective response. French theories replaced concepts of the ‘rational’

¹⁹ Barbara Warnick, *The Sixth Canon: Belletristic Rhetorical Theory and Its French Antecedents* (Columbia: University of South Carolina) p. 10.

²⁰ Jules David Law, *The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I.A. Richards* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993) p. 8.

²¹ Law, p. 3.

²² *Ibid.* p.3.

with such aesthetic considerations as the roles of nature, culture, propriety, and sensation. Thus, aesthetic criteria received the attention that had formerly been given to reasoning and logic.²³ This shift in rhetoric mirrored the British empirical aim of basing judgement on actual experience derived from accounts of the workings of the human mind and away from 'pure reason'. Thus, with both rhetoric and the 'science of man' rejecting the idea that understanding could be achieved by simple reflection, each discipline was in a position to investigate how the other was dealing with this fundamental change.

Smith looked to developments in belletristic rhetoric for insights into how better to clarify observations of human behaviour. Belletristic rhetoric was fascinated with aesthetics and the development of receptive competence. By focusing on reception, rather than production, their aim became to discover what caused pleasure and what made an impression.²⁴ This emphasis was extremely compatible with the introspective empiricism of eighteenth-century Scotland. In Smith's view, rhetoric was worth studying because it represented the best way to explain and illustrate the various powers of the human mind. By the premises of rhetoric, everything we perceive, feel, and which operates on our minds is expressed and delineated in such a manner that it can clearly be distinguished and remembered.²⁵

It should be made clear that this process was not one of the empiricists merely looking to the rhetoricians for insights into perception, but was also marked by the alignment of new rhetoric with contemporary epistemology. As Barbara Warnick notes, "[t]he development of receptive competence was a principal aim of the belletrists; it shaped and profoundly influenced their agendas and their methods."²⁶ The discussion of aesthetics within the rhetorical field itself during this period adopted a very empiricist slant, revolving around sensory capacity and common sense impulses of the interaction between cognition and judgement. Eighteenth-

²³ Warnick, p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 34.

²⁵ See, Dugald Stewart, "Accounts of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D." Essays on Philosophical Subjects of the Late Adam Smith, 1795.

century British belletristic rhetoric became increasingly focused on the specific qualities that were desirable in a discourse and on their effects. This shift of focus in Smith's approach to rhetoric was related by John Millar, Professor of Civil Law at Glasgow, a former student of Smith and a lifelong friend, who made clear that Smith had from the start decided to radically overhaul the traditional teaching style and curriculum when he took over the chair of the Professorship of Logic, turning away from the traditional teachings of 'ancient logic' and toward a system that focused on rhetoric and belles lettres. Smith judged the latter two the best way to illustrate the powers of the human mind, "from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the principles of those literary which contribute to persuasion and entertainment. By these arts, everything we perceive or feel, every operation of our minds, is expressed and delineated in such a manner, that it may be clearly distinguished and remembered". Smith maintained that there was no contemporary "branch of literature more suited to youth at their first entrance upon philosophy than this, which lays hold of their taste and their feelings".²⁷ (See Appendix A) In light of this quote, it must be remembered that Smith's conception of rhetoric was marked by the adoption of sceptical proofs as the basis of their rhetorical method. According to Smith, the mind was said to combine ideas through patterns of association such as resemblance and causation. In this way, rhetoric was seen to work by appealing to the imagination. Rhetoric was to be aimed at stimulating the sensations and the goal of the orator was to make general ideas concrete, lively, and vivid.²⁸

Smith also began to incorporate empirical goals into his rhetorical writing. He repeatedly returned to literary style as an index to the author's moral character because he was attempting to establish a basic standard for evaluating literary tastes, standards that included moral and aesthetic components. Smith saw the

²⁶ Warnick, p. 4.

²⁷ Dugald Stewart. Account of the Life and Writing of Adam Smith, L.L.D., originally published, (London: T. Cadall and W. Davies, 1795); cited in: Intro., Theory of Moral Sentiments, p. 2. The editor also notes in footnote #4 that "Stewart identifies his informant as Millar in a note added to the reprint of the 'Account' included in *Works of Adam Smith* (London, 1811), v.412".

²⁸ Warwick, p. 9.

possibility of establishing guiding principles of aesthetic judgement as the key to the discovery of the most effective styles of composition. For if the former could be established, then the latter could eventually be determined by the same means as those used to discover standards of morality.

His proposition of how this could be accomplished is clearly driven by an empirical orientation. To Smith, aesthetics were perceived not by reason, but by imagination and taste. For the most part, then, aesthetic judgement was characterised as in the mind of the perceiver and, like judgements of morality, are actually expressions of personal sentiments. Thus, there are not any objective, rational standards for aesthetic judgement built into the human character from birth. But like moral behaviour, our natural disposition and personal experience enable our rational faculty to discover, with relative certainty, not only the cause but also the qualities of aesthetics.²⁹ Just as reason and judgement, after, not before, experience can determine the causes and qualities of moral propriety and thus with a fair degree of probability inductively formulate 'rules' of behaviour - so too could set standards for belletristic beauty be found.³⁰ As reflected in Smith's moral theory, everyone was assumed to have some idea of ideal writing style, as which was gradually formed from experience.³¹ With the creation of standards of composition, there could be created a guide for writers and critics because reason could be used to ascertain those qualities of literature that universally please or displease. However, due to the necessary provable qualities of these elements, the number of such rules would be extremely limited.³²

²⁹ See, Smith, Moral Sentiments, p. 290; Smith, Lectures on Jurisprudence, Lecture #13; Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture #20.

³⁰ See, Smith, Moral Sentiments, pp. 29 - 30, 179, 181.

³¹ See, Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture 30; Smith, Moral Sentiment, p. 30.

³² For example, the universally proven rhetorical principles of narration and description should be studied and utilized, and rules of classic decorum should be carefully observed.

3. Rhetoric as a Tool of Persuasion: Moral Sentiments, Polite Society, and Adam Smith

At this point a discussion of the practical implications of the relationship between rhetoric and morals must be offered. This is necessary in order to avoid reading Smith with a naive intellectualism which isolates his characterisation of rhetoric and moral sentiments from its traditional relationship with the socio-political life of the people. For it must be remembered that this characterisation of rhetoric by Smith was shaped by numerous crosscurrents of the cultural renaissance of the eighteenth century. As discussed in the introduction, the rise of 'polite' society and the corresponding interest in belletristic rhetoric, improvement, and commercial society gave the 'science of man' a conceptual framework in which to fashion a new understanding of man's fundamental nature. In its effort to fit its empirical findings into the emerging nature of modern society, or, arguably, perhaps the other way around, rhetoric was employed to make the 'data' fit the 'nature' of modern commercial man, which rests at the core of Smith's theory of society and morality.

The rising influence of middling urban classes in the social and economic institutions of Scotland in the early eighteenth-century was paralleled by a similar increase in their influence on Scottish culture. As is often the case, concerns for standards of behaviour and expression among this rising social rank were pursued in order to consolidate their identity. In the case of the Scots, this search for a new identity revolved around the pursuit of 'polite' society. Due to the nature of post-Union Scotland, such a group was naturally more interested in the rhetoric of polite behaviour and polite tastes than in the rhetoric of political discourse. This desire coupled with the spread of literature and the decrease in the cost of books, made literary culture more accessible to an increased number of people and accommodated those interested in studying high culture as a way of gaining social respectability and cultural authority. This new culture of 'politeness' revolved

around the correct usage of English and the expression of 'polite' taste.³³ The desire to learn how to write and speak English well, to behave like a proper gentleman, and to develop one's 'judgement' and 'taste' prompted Scotland's mid-century merchants, lawyers, and tradesmen to pursue belletristic rhetoric, which offered these rising classes a criteria which demonstrated one's judgement and powers of discernment.³⁴

Belletristic rhetoric studies had an important societal function, namely, the promotion of good sense and morality by instilling the 'polite' values of the emerging culture. For example, the teaching of rhetoric as a formal and distinct discipline in Scotland began almost a century earlier than in English universities.³⁵ The reason why the Scots began to teach English literature and rhetoric at college level was due to the increased interest in 'polite' learning in society as a whole. With a middling class determined to transform Scottish urban society, the pursuit and mastery of 'polite' society allowed them to demonstrate that they were not culturally inferior to their southern compatriots. It was also seen as a way to introduce moderation into the society and thus squelch the political and religious extremists that threatened the stability of the emerging system.

Smith was one of the first to respond to the contemporary developments in philosophy and literary criticism by redefining rhetoric as the study of discourse, including persuasion and literature. The practical nature of Smith's programme was intended both to shape the intellectual discipline as well as social behaviour. One of the most telling remarks relating to the practical implications of language in shaping man is offered in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For central to Smith's hypothesis regarding the nature of man is that:

The desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading and directing other people, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires. It is, perhaps, the instinct upon which is founded

³³ Klein, p. 4.

³⁴ Thomas P. Miller, *Eighteenth-Century Scottish Rhetoric in its Socio-Cultural Context*, Unpublished Ph. D. diss., University of Texas, 1984, p. 63.

³⁵ Miller, p. 75.

the faculty of speech, the characteristical faculty of human nature. No other animal possesses this faculty, and we cannot discover in any other animal any desire to lead and direct the judgement and conduct of its fellows. Great ambition, the desire of real superiority, of leading and directing, seems to be altogether peculiar to man, and speech is the great instrument of ambition, of real superiority, of leading and directing the judgements and conduct of other people.³⁶

As we witnessed in the previous chapter, it is ultimately for this purpose that we hone the skills of communication in order to maximise our ability to elicit sympathy from others.

Smith also contended throughout his life that man's moral and aesthetic judgement could best be refined through engagement in pleasant, informed, 'polite' discussion. In fact, Smith's earliest writings, which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755, called on his countrymen to apply themselves to the study of polite culture. Likewise, The Select Society, of which Smith was an important member, had set as its aim the improvement of culture and language. The connection between a command of the language and a good society consistently coincides in Smith's works as well, illustrating the close relationship of intellectual enquiry and the cultivation of proper 'taste' to members of the Scottish Enlightenment. Rhetorical discipline was presented as a skill which was the duty of the new social elite to master. In both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,³⁷ and *Lectures on Jurisprudence*,³⁸ Smith also asserted that the vehicle for the promotion of polite society was literature, because it taught moral qualities and the good taste that demonstrated them. If this end were to be achieved, these faculties should be developed by way of education and social intercourse.³⁹

³⁶ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 336.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

³⁸ Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, p. 46.

³⁹ Nancy S. Struever, "The Conversable World", *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth: Language Change in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century* (Los Angeles: Clark Memorial Library, 1985).

As a result, Smith's approach to rhetoric was far removed from the traditional 'Ciceronian' discipline outlined in Chapter I, and much more concerned with writing and speech.⁴⁰ Belletristic rhetoric featured significantly in Smith's new approach to rhetoric, with its emphasis on style, observation, and moderation; representing a new synthesis of selected rhetorical teachings with the contemporary philosophy of polite society. Smith presented a rhetoric which was not a body of knowledge containing pre-existing and prescriptive rules of formal modes of argumentation to be mastered, but rather as negotiable and utilitarian, with conventions reflecting the enhanced social flexibility and responsiveness to the increasingly commercial orientation of the society in which it had to be applied.⁴¹ Smith saw the medium of style as a coefficient of civility, and 'right rhetoric' as making an understanding morality accessible to society.

Not only was Smith's conception of rhetoric itself shaped by 'polite' society and its goals; the influence of the goals of polite society, coupled with the ideals of persuasive and convincing rhetorical methods, profoundly influenced the presentation of Smith's 'science of man' as well. It was very much Smith's project to endorse and naturalise the economic processes of commercial society as he saw them, and to accomplish this by regarding these characteristics as fundamental to human nature.⁴² The division of labour and the evolution of the mechanisms of commercial exchange on which his theory of progress depends are portrayed as the unplanned consequences of fundamental human propensities to engage in commercial activity. Smith's utilisations of rhetorical tools in his presentation of his theories are a striking example of rhetorical methods at work. For example, Smith's grandiose style, his wealth of apt and convincing illustrations, help to give his views of human nature an obvious and authoritative air. Yet the assertions made and conclusions drawn are often far more complex,

⁴⁰ Edinburgh University Library, *A Thing Called Rhetoric: Eloquence, Literature and Taste In Edinburgh 1583 - 1995*, 1995.

⁴¹ Copley and Sutherland (eds.), Kurt Heinzelman's article, at p. 177.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

and questionable, than they first appear. He defined wealth and social prosperity as relating to the status of society as a whole rather than just to the possessions and power of the elite.⁴³ This means that the income and well-being of a large sector of society are seen as central in the evaluation of the wealth and stability of a nation. He further maintained that human moral consciousness is developed by the imagination through social interactions and feelings of sympathy for the experience of others.⁴⁴ Such philosophical assumptions are rhetorical: the former legitimises the social aspirations of a larger section of society and the latter makes the engagement in 'polite' society a means of strengthening moral consciousness.

The nature of Smith's writings on the 'science of man' stands testament to the hybrid nature of his views on morality and rhetoric. As Kurt Heinzelman notes, "*Wealth of Nations* is one of the last non-literary works in which we still see how persuasion, in the absence of statistics, mathematics models, and even at times sufficiently raw data," demonstrates that as a genre it lies somewhere between belletristic 'fine' writing and didactically motivated writing.⁴⁵ In the case of the *Wealth of Nations*, "actuality and paradigm, description and prescription, generalisation and disabling qualification, are all repeatedly, and sometimes bewilderingly, elided in Smith's account of the way in which the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord in commercial economics, and by extension in the societies in which they develop."⁴⁶ Smith's emphasis on competition as the means of advancing truth, as well as economic profit, is especially relevant to the study of rhetoric because it makes the pursuit of truth at least partly a rhetorical concern. In this work the text is essentially converted into a virtual celebration of the power of human labour and an attempt to redefine values as related to men's desires.⁴⁷

⁴³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) pp. 376 - 380.

⁴⁴ Adam Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, pp. 11 - 66.

⁴⁵ Copley and Sutherland (eds.), Kurt Heinzelman's article, p. 171.

⁴⁶ Copley and Sutherland (eds.), Introduction, at p. 13.

⁴⁷ Keith Tribe, *Land, Labour, and Economic Discourse* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) pp.

It is clear that Smith imagined his writings on economic and moral subjects as part of the whole socio-political infrastructure dedicated to 'polite' society. Due to this fact, and the need to align his arguments with this goal, Smith's works as a whole take on a 'belletristic aura'.⁴⁸ In the pursuit of the 'truth' behind the 'science of man' necessarily lie the strategic use of persuasion and the conformity of the message with the desires of the reader that is so much a part of the belletristic rhetorical tradition. In the end, it was often the case that the use of rhetoric was employed by Smith to make the 'science of man' conform to the dictates of 'polite' society, and not the other way around.

4. Rhetorical Antecedents to Smith's Theory of Moral Refinement: Influence and Adaptation

Having looked at the ramification of empirical and social developments on Smith's thinking, we will now turn our attention more specifically to the developing ideas of rhetoric during this period which had a profound influence on Smith's conception of moral sentiments. As we observed earlier in this chapter, in the effort to create a 'science of man' and to present a more practical approach to the study of rhetoric in Scotland we witness the replacement of pure reason with the primacy of observation. The two disciplines, faced with similar problems, look to each other for inspiration as to how they could achieve their objectives. More specifically, it appears that in Smith efforts to refine his presentation of his ideas of sentiments and propriety, his efforts to contribute to the creation of a 'science of man' drew extensively on established rhetorical principles.

In order to appreciate this relationship we must first examine the influence of French rhetoric on Adam Smith. The whole belletristic rhetoric methodology that originated in France in the seventeenth century focused on reception, not production, and on what created a pleasurable impression. At the root of this objective was a conception of sentiment and propriety, which was later embraced in

Scotland. The French rhetoricians had seen the need to adjust discourse to the audience's culture, predisposition, and functions of the mind in order to attain rhetorical success. By briefly outlining the French developments in this area by Dubos and Lamy and then turning our attention to Smith's writings on morality, it will become apparent that there is strong evidence that French rhetorical theory greatly influenced his conclusions on the refinement of moral judgement.⁴⁹

The work of Jean-Baptiste Dubos demonstrates a methodology that was empirical, subjectivist, and took into consideration the sentiments. It was Dubos's contention that in any given case of 'judgement' a reaction precedes deliberation, and thus sentiment precedes reason. Due to this, judgement played no immediate role in this process.⁵⁰ It was his contention that sentiment renders the decision, whereas reasoning and judgement only justifies it after the fact. He argued the general public could judge taste, since it was sentiment, rather than artistic rules and principles that moved a person's reactions.⁵¹

In the pursuit of their 'science of man', the Scots were anxious to work toward a new concept of morality in which it could be seen as a social phenomenon. For this reason they were responsive to a theory which involved ready-made faculties. As noted in Chapter I, following on Shaftesbury's presentation of sentiment as a spontaneous reaction, Hutcheson was the first to elaborate on it and adopt sentiments as the focal point of human nature. As with a physical sense, moral sense was portrayed as reflexive, and as requiring no further psycho-analysis. Through sentiment, Hutcheson maintained that an individual could perceive right

⁴⁸ Copley and Sutherland (eds.), Kurt Heinzelman's article, p. 177.

⁴⁹ For an extremely detailed and enlightening discussion of French rhetorical influence on Scottish rhetoric, see, Barbara Warnick, The Sixth Canon: Belletristic Rhetorical theory and Its French Antecedents (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1993). It is interesting to note that Ms. Warnick chose not to deal with Adam Smith, basing this decision on the fact that no original sources of his observations on rhetoric exist.

⁵⁰ Warwick, p. 125. It is interesting to note at this point that the student copyists who recorded Smith's lectures were apparently not conversant in French, since regular blanks occur where French names should have been recorded, or when used, are regularly misspelled. But decipherable references to Dubos do exist in reference to Smith (See, Lectures on Rhetoric, pp. 16, 46, 76, and 226).

⁵¹ Warnick, p. 128.

and wrong conduct. Hume, discussed in Chapter II, pushed the analysis of sentiments farther and began to develop his conception of sentiments and their relationship to sympathy. As discussed in this and the proceeding chapter, Smith also relegated both moral and aesthetic judgements to the realm of sentiment, not to reason, and took the idea of sentiments as the key concept of the moral nature. It would seem, however, that Smith, while maintaining the same basic premises as regards the centrality of the sentiments rather than reason in discerning moral virtue as Hume, took the rhetorical implications of these conceptions as being far more important due to his conclusion that the desire for the maximisation of sympathetic response was the key to man's conception of virtue.

To demonstrate the impact of rhetorical principles on Smith's efforts to illustrate and substantiate his claims regarding how man goes about maximising his sympathetic interaction it is instructional to review the work of the seventeenth century French rhetorician Bernard Lamy. His work marked a radical departure from the scholastic and neo-classical rhetoric which had preceded it. A precursor to belleterism, Lamy was pre-occupied with studying forms of expression so as to discover how the mind worked and how its functioning in turn affected human nature.⁵² Adopting a reductionist view of the mind's operation, he too focused on the immediate, involuntary responses to discourse rather than on a cognitive, rational response.

Lamy contended that persuasion was tied to all efforts to communicate. He believed that this was essential for an orator to utilise the audience's inclinations by discovering the values relevant to the audience and directing them into premises that favoured his position in order to gain their approval.⁵³ He judged that response of an audience was nearly automatic, and the goal was to find what triggered a response and to convey one's expression in such a manner as to incite a desired

⁵² Warwick, pp. 21 - 34. It should be noted that Smith does not cite Lamy specifically, but he does make reference to his followers and contemporaries. While a translation of Lamy's *L'Art de parler* (*Art of Speaking*) was available in English by 1676; due to Smith's massive French library, it is likely that Smith at some point read it in the original French.

reaction in the audience. "To persuade," Lamy observed, "we must find a way to bring People to our Sentiments that were of a contrary Sentiment before: We must put our matter in Order in our minds, and having fairly disposed it, we must make a choice of such words as are proper to express it."⁵⁴

Lamy was pre-occupied with the idea of *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude) and *bienséance* (propriety). *Vraisemblance* refers to the need to conform one's narration to the audience's past experiences and present expectations.⁵⁵ It developed from a general notion of what was natural and appropriate in given circumstances. Even though an action might have actually occurred, it might very well lack *vraisemblance* because it was such a derivation from the normal course of action that no audience could be expected to identify with it. The expression that was put forth was to be carefully attuned to the passion which was trying to be conveyed. If this were not achieved, the speaker's or narrator's credibility would be greatly undermined.⁵⁶

Bienséance dictated that one must always be aware of cultural practices and mores. It was a consideration of aesthetic judgement that referred to social conventions and tacit rules as to what was appropriate in a given social situation.⁵⁷ Revolving around the rigid class system of seventeenth-century France, *bienséance* had two dimensions, one internal, the other external. The internal application focused on whether a character's actions conformed to his rank, age, and situation. The external application was concerned with whether a depiction matched the audience's expectations of what was normal and appropriate.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 28 - 29.

⁵⁴ See, Bernard Lamy, *L'Art de parler*, (1699 ed.), at pp. 304 - 305.

⁵⁵ Warnick, pp. 32, 41 - 43.

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 44 - 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 47.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 48.

The aim was to strike a balance between *vraisemblance* and *bienseance* which would evoke admiration and the effective response from the listener.⁵⁹ Through the observance of propriety at both levels, it allowed the listener to identify with the speaker and with the experiences and the responses the speaker wished to convey. If the speaker's style, manner or expression did not match up with those the listener would experience in similar circumstances and so propriety was violated, then the rhetoric would have no effect upon the listener.⁶⁰

Smith's conception of rhetoric and moral propriety was very likely influenced by Lamy's rhetoric, particularly Lamy's conceptions of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance*. In fact he entitled his initial section of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* "Of the Sense of Propriety," *Bienséance*, which is dedicated to a description of essentially *vraisemblance* and *bienseance* principles. As with Lamy, the central focus of this section is how to strike a balance between these two elements in order to evoke admiration and an effective response from another. In this case, the relationship is not between orator and listener, but between the agent of a particular sentiment and the individual from which he wishes to evoke a response.

Smith concurred with Lamy's contention that a writer should transmit his thoughts in a manner which is coherent, natural, and suited to the capacities of their audience.⁶¹ He states, "[W]hen the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner, and the passion or affection he is poss{ess}ed of and intends, *by sympathy*, to communicate to his hearer, is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it."⁶² In his opinion, "the perfection of stile consists in Express(ing) in the most concise, proper and precise manner which best conveys the sentiment, passion or affection with which it affects or he pretends it does affect him and which he designs to communicate to his reader." This is a standard which is, "equally

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 57.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 58 - 59.

⁶¹ See, Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Lecture 7, pp. 33 - 35; Lecture 8 pp. 40 - 47.

⁶² Ibid., Lecture 6, p. 25.

applicable to conversation and behaviour as writing. For what is that makes a man agreeable company, is it not, when his sentiments appear to be naturally expressed, when the passion or affection is properly conveyed and when their thoughts are so agreeable and natural that we find ourselves inclined to give our assent to them.”⁶³

Smith also agreed that expression should be natural, not overworked, and ordered so as best to express the author’s character and emotions. He states that in writing, “one should stick to his naturall (*sic.*) character: gay man should not endeavour to be grave nor the grave man to be gay, but each should regulate that character and manner ... and hinder it from running into that vicious extreme to which he is most inclined.”⁶⁴ In Smith’s opinion, observing propriety in one’s style and expression enables an audience or readership to identify more easily with the speaker or author and, in turn, what they are trying to convey. For, “it is when the expression is agreeable to the sense of the speaker and his affections that we admire.”⁶⁵

For Smith the chief aim of any discourse was to so express oneself so that the idea or passion conveyed could be fully and easily experienced by the reader.⁶⁶ “The whole of the objects described should tend to excite the same emotion otherwise the end will not be answered. Where the chief design is to excite mirth and chearfullness nothing should be brought in that is gloomy and horrible, and on the other hand where we would raise awfull grand sentiments, the whole must tend that way.”⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Smith noted “[T]hat when the words neatly and properly expressed the thing be described, and conveyed the sentiment the author entertained of it and desired to communicate [to his hearer] by sympathy to his hearers; the expression had all the beauty language was capable of bestowing on it.”⁶⁸ Thus, when this balance is struck, granted the inherent limits of language

⁶³ Ibid., Lecture 11, p. 55.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Lecture 8, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Lecture 7, p. 34.

⁶⁶ Warnick, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture 13, p. 71.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Lecture 8, p. 40.

recognised by Smith and discussed in the previous chapter, it is the most that any individual could hope for in his efforts to both share the true sentiments they are feeling and, in turn, elicit the maximum amount of sympathy.

Lamy's approach to rhetoric seems to have had a profound effect upon Smith's conception of moral propriety as well. For at the centre of Smith's view of sympathy lies the need to measure one's action by the yardstick of propriety in given circumstances. It is the coupling of the infinite nuances of the sentiment with the infinite manifestations of different personalities that Smith sees as the explanation for the lack of clear fast rules in the area of morality. Smith notes in his lectures on rhetoric: "The different passions all proceed in like manner from different states of mind and outward circumstances. But it would be both endless and useless to go thro' all these different affections and passions in this manner. It would be endless, because tho the simple passions are of no great number, yet these are so compounded in different manners as to make a number of mixt ones almost infinite. It would be useless, for tho we had gone thro all the different affections yet the difference of character and age and circumstances of the person would so vary the affects that our rules would not be at all applicable".⁶⁹ It is this reality was discussed in the previous chapter, and it will be remembered that the innumerable manifestations of sentiment was something that he was troubled by in relations to effective sympathetic interaction. Therefore it is Smith's project to provide individuals with the tools by which they may, despite this fact, still reach some degree of mutual understanding, and thus moral understanding. In order to do this, both the nature of language and the uniqueness of each individual situation must be taken into consideration.

As a result, the idea of *vraisemblance* plays an important role in Smith's conception of the effective transmission of the sentiments. Smith not only contended that propriety, approbation and sympathy are inexorably linked, but that approval is only granted when the agent acts in a manner appropriate to the given

⁶⁹ Ibid., Lecture 13, p. 69.

situation. This idea of the decorum of the agent in relation to their character and situation directly affected his view of the effective transmission of sympathetic feelings:

The objects with which men in the different professions and states of life are conversant, being very different, and habituating them to very different passions, naturally form in them very different characters and manners. We expect in each rank and profession, a degree of those manners, which, experience has taught us, belong to it. But as in each species of things, we are particularly pleased with the middle conformation, which, in every part and feature, agrees most exactly with the general standard which nature seems to have established for things of the kind; so in each rank, or, if I may say so, species of men, we are particularly pleased, if they have neither too much, nor too little of the character which usually accompanies their particular condition and situation.⁷⁰

This distinction based on an individual's particular station is reflected throughout his notes on rhetoric. In the end, conformity to one's 'role' in a given the situation, appears to be the very significant element of Smith's conception of morality.

This element also figures heavily in what is considered by Smith to be a prototypical example of virtue. In Part VI of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in a section entitled, 'Of the Character of Virtue', a prudent man is characterised as who is characterised by being to carry on convivial, inoffensive, and sprightly conversation. In this respect he is a better example of proper behaviour than has been done by such 'splendid talents and virtues' from past ages from Socrates to Voltaire, from Alexander the Great to Peter the Great, who have "too often distinguished themselves by the most improper and even insolent contempt of all the ordinary decorums of life and conversation, and who thereby set the most pernicious example to those who wish to resemble them, and who too often content themselves with imitating their follies, without even attempting to attain their perfection".⁷¹ (See Appendix B) This passage amply demonstrates the balance that Smith maintained must be struck between *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* in

⁷⁰ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 201.

order to make for effective communication. It also highlights the fact that this equilibrium does not necessarily manifest itself in those of rank or status, yet, at the same time, is achievable by anyone. Smith would seem to argue that man couldn't simply look to the great or grand for guidance on such matters, no matter how refined and estimable their characters are often portrayed.

This is not to say that these individuals, as individuals, do not necessarily act in a fitting manner in regard to their own character, but simply that one should not attempt to pattern one's own life by mimicking exactly the unique character and personal status of any one person. The reason for this is that Smith does not accept that there are any iron-clad methods of judgement, but rather that such determinations have everything to do with the particular circumstances surrounding them and the variable character of the individuals involved. For example, Smith goes on to describe the very contrasting styles of ridicule utilised by Swift and the Epicurean Lucian. In the case of Swift, while Smith cited him as someone whom we would not necessarily look to pattern our lives around, this does not mean that his actions were not befitting his own character. Swift's naturally morose nature, coupled with a trying life, resulted in contempt being a fitting part of his character. While this temperament may have gone against the grain of abstract societal convention, his "morose temper" resulted in a writing style that utilised clear and proper language to make a folly of the trivial concerns of the society he found around him. In the end, Smith concluded that the "characters which Swift exposes were those which best suited his taste."⁷¹ That character would not, however, be likely to suit another person, nor would an attempt to mimic Swift's writing style result in an effective expression of that person's sentiments.

In order to highlight this point, after his discussion of Swift, Smith moved on to discuss the writings of Lucian. In contrast to Swift, Lucian is portrayed as having a dramatically different personality. He exhibits a "merry gay and jovial

⁷¹ Smith, *Ibid.*, pp. 214 - 215.

⁷² Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture 9, p. 49.

temper", as a man who sought out as much pleasure as possible. In turn, his writing style also stands in stark contrast to Swift's approach to the conveyance of ridicule. His focus is not on folly, but on the most solemn and respectable of characters. Lucian, however, is able to inject humorous ridicule even the most serious of topics by surprising and diverting his audience at every turn.

This contrast in characters seems to be presented by Smith in order to highlight the fact that the correlation between the *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* is very much dependent on striking a personal balance between the two based on the individual's unique character, experience, and social setting. Though dramatically different in their temperaments and writing styles, both Swift and Lucian effectively utilise ridicule. "There is hardly any folly of the gayer sort that Swift passes over and scarce any of the graver that is omitted by Lucian. Either of them taken alone might be apt to prejudice one in favour of the follies contrary to those he ridicules; But both together form a System of morality from whence more sound and just rules of life for all the various characters of men may be drawn than from the most set systems of Morality."⁷³ The reason for this is that "[M]en do not differ so much in the degrees of Virtue and Wisdom as in the Peculiar Tinges which these may Receive from the other Ingredients of their Character."⁷⁴ It is this premise which plays such a critical role in Smith's conception of moral sentiments.

⁷³ Ibid., Lecture 9, pp. 51 - 52.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Lecture 15, p. 79.

The idea of *bienséance* also goes some way toward sorting out Smith's distinction between different manifestations of moral sentiments witnessed between nations and cultures. In line with the fundamental premise of *bienséance*, Smith maintained that, "[I]n describing the character of a nation The Government may be considered in the same view as the air of a single person; The Situation, Climate, Customs as those peculiarities which give a distinguishing tincture to the character, and form the same general out lines into very different appearances."⁷⁵ Degrees of temperament also explain the differences seen between different ages and nationalities. (see Appendix C) Nevertheless, at the most fundamental level, they all share similar primal characteristics. "All these effects of custom and fashion, however," asserts Smith, "upon the moral sentiments of mankind, are inconsiderable, in comparison of those which they give occasion to in some other cases; and it is not concerning the general style of character and behaviour, that those principles produce the greatest perversion of judgement, but concerning the propriety or impropriety of particular usages."⁷⁶ Thus, at the foundation, the same fundamental moral sentiments inherent in all mankind are at play, yet the manifestation of these basic sentiments exhibit themselves in multifarious ways given the influence of *bienséance* on their external expression.

This fact, in Smith's opinion, did not have to do merely with style, but with the "nature and temper of the Language itself".⁷⁷ Smith goes on to compare the very different writing styles between Ancient Roman and Ancient Greek authors. Due to the nature of Roman society, with its limited number of citizens who controlled all the power and wealth, the language of the society was pompous and ornate. In contrast, the citizens of Athens were all on equal footing, and thus they "lived and talked" together with the greatest of familiarity. As a result, we see that in the Dialogues of Plato there is no "Politeness or Compliments"; whereas Cicero has a great deal of them. This is due to the fact that, "[I]n the one country the People at

⁷⁵ Ibid., Lecture 15, p. 82.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 209.

⁷⁷ Smith, Lectures on Rhetoric, Lecture 26, p. 154.

least the Nobles would converse and harangue with Dignity, Pomp and the air of those who speak with authority. The language of the others would be that of freedom, ease, and familiarity. ... Pomp and Splendour suit the former well enough but would appear presumption in the other.”⁷⁸ In the end, “[T]hese differences in the Stile [*sic*] of these orators may probably arise from the different condition of the countries in which they lived; the tempers of the men had no doubt also have had their effects.”⁷⁹

Here we see Smith grappling with the same issue we saw addressed by Hume in Chapter II, namely, how do we explain the characterisation of different characteristics in different cultures and at different points in history as valid without being accused of moral subjectivity? Hume had justified such differences by relying upon an analysis of the utility of the actions within a given social context or society. Smith on the other hand seems to rely on those attempting to assess the virtue of a given activity based on their experience and taking into consideration the temperament of the party under scrutiny. The fact that the individual lived in another time or another culture is only pertinent in so much as that the impartial spectator would take certain temperaments, personal or cultural, into consideration when passing judgment. That this reaction would take these elements into consideration is assumed by *bienséance*. In the end, Smith concludes as did Hume that we will be able to see through such differences and see the essence of the virtue behind the action, albeit in a dramatically different matter.

For in Smith’s view the aim of all discourse, be it in writing or personal interaction, individual or national, was to present a given experience in a manner that allows the experience it conveys to be readily replicated in the experience of the reader or hearer. This ability was equated with ‘propriety’, which implied, as Brian Vickers has said, “that the listener will judge the speaker’s accuracy in expressing emotion by reference to what he has himself felt in similar occasions”.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid., Lecture 26, p. 158 - 159.

⁷⁹ Ibid., Lecture 26, p. 160.

⁸⁰ Brian Vickers, as quoted in Warnick, at p. 2.

The propriety of a person's actions is strictly determined by the propriety of his sentiments. Thus, the 'audience' in the moral sense is the 'spectator' of some morally determinable action. The spectator judges as proper "the original passions of the person principally concerned," when they "are in perfect concord with the sympathy emotions of the spectator," when to this "spectator, they necessarily appear ... just and proper and suitable to their objects."⁸¹ And in so doing also, "rendering ourselves the proper objects of esteem and approbation".⁸²

Thus, the one way we determine if an action is deserving of sympathy is if we judge that the reaction is in accordance with our own. This is determined in Smith's theory by the spectator identifying an agent's actions as in conformance with the spectator's past experiences and conforming with what he believes is natural and appropriate given the circumstances. This concept is central to Lamy's definition of, *vraisemblance*. As with Lamy, if the behaviour is not in conformity with what is appropriate given the situation, the spectator judges an action as is improper when "upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels", thus, "they appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them."⁸³ Using sympathy as a means of judging actions in others, the spectator naturally judges a particular action by whether the act is appropriate to its causes and its effects. If the action fits the situation, then the spectator determines the act to be appropriate and worthy of merit.

In order to put oneself in another's place by sympathy, one must evoke in oneself a sentiment similar to that of the other person's. Experience alone enables one to imagine another's feelings under the circumstances. These experiences are drawn from the society in which we ourselves experience approval and disapproval. Since this sense of approval or disapproval is necessarily drawn from cultural experience, *bienséance*, is necessary. In accordance with Lamy, this has a

⁸¹ Smith, *Moral Sentiment*, p. 17.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16 - 17.

regulative function in Smith's theories, as people internalise appropriate and inappropriate reactions from their societal experiences and moderate their behaviour in order to conform.

This type of analysis is not limited to the person judging the action but also involves the agent being judged. Like Lamy's narrator, who tries to find *vraisemblance*, we are anxious to communicate our sympathy to others. We desire to sympathise with others, and desire to share others' sympathy. Thus, we attempt to reach an accord or balance, and, if it is reached, then we have found a standard of propriety. As with Lamy's narrator, if this is not achieved our credibility is greatly undermined and the likelihood of receiving an understanding response from the audience is greatly decreased. A person in search of sympathy, like a narrator, must constantly be aware that his case should not be overstated and that his characterisation of the situation at hand, transmitted by his emotional reaction to the situation, should always be gauged so as to conform to what is expected. Only then can the passions being conveyed to the spectator be expected to receive the response they are after.

Presupposed in this free communication and adjustment of sentiments is the primacy of persuasion, rather than force, as a mode of daily social relations. Again, we see Lamy's contention that persuasion is tied to all efforts to communicate, has been utilised in Smith's theory. "In a civil nation," asserted Smith, "the passions of men are not commonly so furious ... seldom very hurtful and seem frequently to aim at no other satisfaction, but that of *convincing* the spectator, that they are in the right to be so much moved, and of procuring his sympathy and approbation."⁸⁴ Thus, sentiments become more social and more dependent upon the art of persuasion. The sympathy dynamic even makes persuasion something of an end, rather than a mere means.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 208-209, (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ Henry C. Clark, "Conversation and Moderate Virtue in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*", *Review of Politics*, v.24 (1992) p. 195.

Lastly, as with Lamy's description of *bienséance*, there is an internal and external application of propriety in Smith's idea of sympathy. The internal application in Lamy focused on rigidly, revolving around conformity with one's own character. In Smith this was transformed into the introspection of the internal spectator, who is the final arbiter of an individual's own character. The external application for Lamy was whether the depiction matched the audience's expectations of what was normally and appropriate. This is essentially the criteria of judgement used by the spectator in Smith's theory of moral sentiments.

The influence of the concepts of rhetoric advanced and popularised by both Dubos and Lamy on Smith's conception of sentiments, at this point, seems to be quite perceptible. As has been pointed out in the previous section, the Scots were very much open to the utilisation of concepts that in their mind accurately explained human nature regardless of their origin. While Dubos and Lamy's observations on the nature of the transmission of sentiments had traditionally been termed 'rhetoric,' in the new age they were seen as sufficiently provable facts worthy of inclusion in the 'science of man'. It was not their label, but rather their usefulness, which dictated whether they had any place in the empirical world that was emerging. The insights offered by Dubos and Lamy appear to have been deemed of sufficient merit and accuracy as to have been adopted and adapted by Smith in his presentation of how one goes about maximising sympathetic interaction. In their efforts to discover the fundamentals of human nature, philosophers such as Smith used the discovery and utilisation of any tool available to them. Many of these tools were in a former incarnation seen as rhetorical, but were re-conceptualised by Smith as the very foundations of the exchange, and particularly the refinement, of moral sentiments themselves.

In the end, we see the degree to which the influence of language came to permeate the social and moral theories of Adam Smith. The examination undertaken in this and the previous chapter make it clear that language was held by Smith to be an essential tool in both the formation and refinement of man's moral

sentiments. The formation of linguistic skills within society were seen by Smith as a perfect model on which to illustrate, substantiate and refine his theory of moral sentiments. In addition, due to the ambiguous nature of language, the onus of moral refinement was placed on the individual, and was only achievable through the medium of language and the refinement of belletristic rhetorical principles.

CHAPTER VI

Thomas Reid: Linguistic Discourse and Theoretical Discontent

It has been argued in the preceding chapters is that, while perhaps not discussed in isolation, Hume and Smith's assumptions regarding the nature of language were utilized as tools to illustrate and substantiate their characterisations of man's social and moral nature. This chapter will maintain that these conclusions are reinforced by the antithetic methodology championed by Thomas Reid in the latter half of the century. Traditionally seen as one of the great antagonist of the sceptical and arguably relativistic leanings emerging out the Scottish Enlightenment, it will be argued that Reid's efforts to refute the theoretical conclusions of Hume and Smith likewise enlisted man's use of language to illustrate and demonstrate his own theory. This fact, in itself, lends weight to the claim that contemporaries of Hume and Smith took very seriously the implications of their references to language as it relates to the 'science of man' and, as a result, Reid's challenges to their moral theories drew upon linguistic distinctions.

Best remembered as the founder of Common Sense Philosophy, as the successor of Adam Smith to the Moral Philosophy Chair at the University of Glasgow, and as the great intellectual foil of David Hume, Reid's use of linguistic models to illustrate, and perhaps more importantly, demonstrate the validity of his methodology. Following even the most cursory exploration of his reasoning it soon becomes evident that Reid's intellectual endeavours to counter the assertions of Hume and Smith are honeycombed throughout with references to language and language use. Reid's published works, unpublished writings, and student notes taken in Reid's lectures at the University of Glasgow all point to the fact that he must have been thinking quite seriously about language and its natural relationship

to man's nature in the wake of both Hume's and Smith's theories, setting forth a discussion of language and language use which coloured his effort to counter their arguments.

For, while the use of language as both an illustrative and analytical tool are present in Reid's philosophy, he does not, in contrast to Hume and Smith, conceive of language as playing the same role in the transmission and development of moral sentiments. This divergence, I will argue, can be traced to Reid's aversion to moral relativism, sceptical deduction, and the ethical fallout he predicted would result if society were to be constructed on the foundations outlined by both Hume and Smith. Fusing together traditional Christian ideals and Common Sense philosophy, Reid attempted to re-assert the more traditional lines of thinking which both Smith, and particularly Hume, had undermined with their conception of morality as manifested in linguistically demonstrable social reality. As we shall see, Reid's challenge to both Smith and Hume regarding their characterisation of morals ultimately revolved around Reid's fear that if their theories were to take hold, there would be "nothing left for us but to sink into an abyss of absolute scepticism".¹

In order to counter this alarming conclusion, Reid presented a theory of morals in which language was characterised as not merely a relative social construct, but rather the conduit through which universal moral truths are made evident to mankind. While it is clear that Reid, along with Hume and Smith, maintained that personal virtuousness was manifest when one's private moral sentiments were reflected in the moral character of the nation as a whole, Reid's conception of how this process took place differed dramatically from that of Hume and Smith. Hume had focused the capacity for linguistic convention to reflect the social utility enshrined in ideas of virtue and vice, and Smith had seen an awareness of language and language use as important in our efforts to maximise our sympathetic interactions and our moral understanding. However, Reid argued that the

¹ George Baird, Notes from Thomas Reid's Moral Philosophy Lectures, 1779 - 1780. 8 vols. ML MS. A104929, Lecture 91.

cultivation of specific moral virtues was dependent on understanding and training the rational powers of the mind. This assertion presented a challenge to what Reid judged to be Hume's relativist moral theory as well as Smith's sentiment-based ethical system. To contest the theories of Smith and Hume, Reid deemed it necessary to distance his moral theory from a simple evolution of man's sympathetic responses. Yet, at the same time, he also considered it compulsory to re-affirm the universal and innate moral character of man in any operable theory of man's social or moral character. In order to do this, Reid would need to present a characterisation of language and language use that differed dramatically from that of both Hume and Smith.

Defining language as, "all those signs 'which mankind use in order to communicate to others their thoughts and intentions, their purpose and desires'," ² it is Reid's contention that much can be discovered by "the sense of mankind expressed in the structure of language". ³ As we will see, in order to discover this sense, Reid constructed an interpretation of the 'science of man' around a depiction of language and language use that underscored the innate and universal element of mankind's nature as manifest in language itself. Reid stressed the fact that "[N]o man can be ignorant of the importance of this faculty, for our instruction, for our direction, and for our comfort in the mutual intercourse of mankind. But few perhaps are aware of it in order to [aid] our learning to think and to reason. The capacity of thinking and reasoning we have from Nature. But the habit of thinking as rational creatures, is got by exercise and imitation of those whose thoughts can be communicated to us [as we] learn to speak and to think at the same time and every improvement in the first carries improvement in the last". ⁴ By unlocking the true nature and influence of language, Reid believed that not only was the true moral character of man revealed, but also that the misguided reasoning of his fellow Scots would be exposed.

² Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (eds.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983) p. 32.

³ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1785. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (eds.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983) p. 158.

1. First Principles, Common Sense and the Construction of Reid's Linguistic Paradigm

A basic tenet of Reid's methodology was his contention that, "if philosophy was subjected to the discipline of methodological first principles it would furnish a grammar by which to understand the 'languages of things themselves' as they appear to the human mind".⁵ Reid appeared to consider the most effective way to establish the existence of such a 'grammar' and 'language' of the human mind was by an exploration of the existing linguistic system. By studying and observing the attributes of language, Reid hoped to ultimately reveal the true nature of human understanding which it mirrored. In order to gain an understanding of how Reid envisioned this project, it is necessary to explore briefly the relationship Reid saw between language and the building blocks of this methodology, namely, first principles and common sense.

Reid defined first principles as innate necessary truths. They reveal themselves as self-evident facts via both our perceptions of the outside world, and through internal beliefs arising from them. Reid maintained, "to suppose a general deviation from truth among mankind in things self-evident, of which no cause can be assigned, is highly unreasonable".⁶ First principles are the result of the maxims of common sense and do not require justification by reasoning from ideas or impressions as was necessary in Hume's philosophy.⁷ It was Reid's contention also that every man is a competent judge of first principles: "[T]o judge of first principles, requires no more than a sound mind free from prejudice, and a distinct conception of the question. The learned and the unlearned, the philosopher and the

⁴ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, AUL MSS. 2131/1-8, 4/I/30.

⁵ Melvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews (eds.) *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) p. 342.

⁶ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 264.

⁷ Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 26.

day-labourer, are upon a level, and will pass the same judgement, when they are not misled by some bias, or taught to renounce their understanding from some mistaken religious principles".⁸

Reid located the initial, and crucial, connection between the concept of first principles and language in the vast array of characteristics he associated with natural language. It was Reid's contention that one distinguishing characteristic of first principles was that first principles are not discovered by reasoning. They were portrayed as being antecedent to reasoning, due to the fact that man must have the ability to enter into society before reason can be developed. If there were not a built-in method of advancing man's ability to reason and interact with his fellow man, argued Reid, "[W]e could have no more intercourse with man than with trees. The principle is the foundation of all knowledge that is received by instruction and information".⁹ Given this assumption on the part of Reid, the existence of natural language was crucial to the advancement of first principles, as it served as the foundation structure upon which they are founded, and also serves as the medium through which they were brought into society and to man's understanding.

The first stage by which these principles became evident to man was through the use of natural language. Reid maintained, in line with Condillac and Smith, that, "we know the thoughts and passions of the mind by their signs in the features of the face, the modulation of the voice and the gestures of the body". This is prior to any experience, and as a result, most passions have natural signs. Reid opined, "[E]very emotion has a feature, a modulation, or gesture proper to it and which gives evidence of it".¹⁰ Reid further asserted that natural language is a language common to all, both learned and unlearned people, and as such, was judged by him to be the crucial foundation upon which man comes to know these first principles and utilise them to expand his mind. It is the communicative character of natural language itself, therefore, which facilitates man's ability to access and understand

⁸ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 259.

⁹ Baird, Lecture 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Lecture 48.

all the other first principles that he becomes aware of over time. Through this most basic of communicative means, a huge wellspring of assumptions about man's innate character was therefore realised.

Significantly, linked with these contentions relating to the innate character of natural language were the associated assumptions regarding natural language's universality and uniformity. Reid maintained that if all minds shared the same basic structure, the same basic predisposition for communication, and the same signified objects as reference points, it stood to reason that this uniformity would manifest itself as well in man's actions and interactions. What we find is that, throughout Reid's works, there are constant justifications given in all areas based on the simple fact that a certain term 'is universal in all languages', 'all languages have a word for this', or words to this affect.¹¹ Reid presented this fact as proof that the language itself revealed certain elements of man's nature, which are both universal and uniform. "Every language has its peculiarities", noted Reid, "but what is found common to all language must be considered as springing from a common cause. Thus, for example, all languages have a plural number. This could not have been the case if men had had no idea of what philosophers call universals, i.e. mind and classes commanding many individuals".¹² As we shall see, be it grammatical structure or moral categorisation, Reid believed these first principles manifested themselves in all languages, and this fact in turn proved the universality and uniformity of the principles themselves.

Building upon these philosophical premises associated with the innate character of natural language, Reid drew the same conclusions in regards to his characterisation of the relationship between linguistic constants and first principles. For example, student notes record that Reid began his first lecture on Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow in 1779 by asserting:

As in every language there are words common to the vulgar equally as to the philosopher we need no explanation, so in every Science

¹¹ For but a few examples, see, *Ibid.*, Lectures 9, 18, 67, 90, 94, and 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, Lecture 9.

there are principles we admit of no proof. All men of common understanding agree in them and justly consider the man who denies them as lunatic. It is in vain to reason with such a man, before we reason with any one we must be in possession of some first uncontravened first principles to which we could appeal as a standard.¹³

This quote adroitly encapsulates the way in which all three, namely, natural language, common sense, and first principles, were crucial to Reid's philosophy, each offering a means of pointing out the manifestation of those intrinsic human characteristics of man which are not only central to his character, but also essential to any true understanding of his nature. Rather than seeing Reid's conceptions of first principles as being dictated by the construct of natural language, or seeing his discussion of natural language as merely an example of a first principle, it seems more true to Reid's methodology to depict them as one organic whole.

Part of the confirmation of this shared reality is the ability of individuals to communicate with each other. In order for this to take place there must be some means by which this universal ordering creates a medium in which like minds can communicate. One of the essential ways this universal structuring itself is revealed is in the form of universal grammar rules. It is due to the fact that we find, for example, the same parts of speech: nouns, adjectives, verbs active and passive, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and general rules of syntax. In Reid's opinion, this fact revealed something very profound: "There are certain common opinions of mankind, upon which the structure and grammar of all languages are founded. While these opinions are common to all men, there will be a great similarity in all languages that are to be found on the face of the earth. There are general rules of grammar, the same in all languages. This similarity in structure among men in those opinions upon which the structure of language is founded".¹⁴ This grammatical uniformity was presented by Reid as confirming his conclusions regarding the structure of the human mind. This contention, that we possess an innate capacity to grasp the rules of grammatical structure, was central to Reid's

¹³ Ibid., Lecture 1.

argument. This structure revealed that human linguistic competence was innate and that universals in grammatical underlying structure reflect this fact. The existence of such uniformity across the spectrum of human existence and experience was seen as providing evidence of the uniformity of human thinking and social character.

Closely associated with this grammatical correlation was the uniformity to be found in the concepts themselves, enshrined within this grammatical structure. These are the universal concepts, in the form of general words, which these grammatical first principles are used to structure. It was Reid's contention, that "[G]eneral words are so necessary in language, it is natural to conclude that there must be general conceptions, of which they are the signs".¹⁵ The reason for this is that:

Words are empty sounds when they do not signify the thoughts of the speaker; and it is only from their signification that they are denominated general. Every word that is spoken, considered merely as a sound, is an individual sound. And it can only be called a general word, because that which it signifies is general. Now, that which it signifies, is conceived by the mind both of the speaker and the hearer, if the word have a distinct meaning, and be distinctly understood. It is, therefore, impossible that words can have a general signification, unless there be conceptions in the mind of the speaker and of the hearer, of things that are general. It is to such that I give the name of general conceptions; and it ought to be observed, that they take this denomination, not from the act of the mind in conceiving, which is an individual act, but from the object or thing conceived, which is general.¹⁶

Due to these assumptions Reid concludes that universals are always expressed by general words and that, "all the words of language, excepting proper names, are general words; they are the signs of general conceptions, or of some circumstance relating to them". These general conceptions are formed in Reid's opinion for the purpose of language and reasoning; and "the object from which they are taken, and

¹⁴ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, pp. 148 - 149.

¹⁵ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 234.

to which they are intended to agree, is the conception which other men join to the same words; they may, therefore, be adequate, and perfectly agree with the thing conceived.” This implies that men who speak the same language will inevitably agree as to the meaning of many general words.¹⁷

While Reid may have chosen to draw the line at what is known within a particular linguistic group, it is clear that he contended this process goes on in all languages and represents not only the uniformity of concepts within a language, but also revealed the universal correspondence between these general concepts. These general words, or at least the concepts signified by them, are not limited to individual linguistic groups. As noted earlier, if one reads through Reid’s notes, published works, and student lecture notes, one discovers a re-occurring theme throughout: Reid consistently concluded explanations of concepts, be they extremely basic or the most abstract, with the remark that the particular concept in question ‘could be found in every language’. While these almost endpoint-like statements on the surface might seem to be examples innocuous afterthoughts, their persistent use would indicate a much more purposeful and profound intention. By tagging this statement on to the end of his discussions, these general concepts were all depicted as representing fundamental principles shared in common by all men. Albeit in different languages, the universality of the thing signified by these general words meant that, though all men might not share the same language, all languages throughout the world utilised the exact same categories.

Regardless of the vocal signs used, the language’s range of subject matter, the things signified, and the grammar used, in Reid’s opinion are all pre-ordained. It is thus through the medium of language, and the revelation about the universal and inherent nature of man revealed by language, that allows us to gain an understanding of others. “[A]ll the distinct knowledge we have or can attain of any individual”, maintained Reid, “is the knowledge of its attributes; for we know not

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 224.

the essence of any individual. This seems beyond the reach of human faculties. Now, every attribute is what the ancients called an universal [*sic*]. It is, or may be, common to various individuals. There is no attribute belonging to any creature of God which may not belong to others; and, on this account, attributes, in all languages, are expressed in general words”.¹⁸ It was Reid’s contention that this uniformity in the structure of language demonstrates the existence of a degree of uniformity in the grounds upon which that structure is based, “[A]nd that nature has dictated the same to all men, appears from the structure of all languages; for in all languages men have expressed thinking, reasoning, willing, loving, hating, by personal verbs, which, from their nature, require a person who thinks, reasons, wills, loves, or hates. From which it appears, that men have been taught by nature to believe that thought requires a thinker, reason a reasoner, and love a lover.”¹⁹

The uniformity of grammatical structure, combined with the universal nature of the concepts being signified within that grammatical framework, led Reid to believe that language demonstrated the universal uniformity of man’s mental abilities as well. “When we try to prove that there is life and intelligence in the creatures with whom we converse in society”, Reid noted, “laying aside our natural conviction, no other reason can be given for it but that their [illegible] are so like our own that we judge them to proceed from the same thoughts, reasoning from the same similarities of the effects to the same source of the causes”.²⁰ Without such a means to gain correlation with the thoughts and feelings of others, “we could have no language, no intercourse with other men”.²¹ The universality of language use, as well as the universal structural similarities of that use, were seen by Reid as clear evidence as to a nearly every aspect of human nature. He stated, “[N]ow if we compare the general principles of our constitution, which fit us for receiving information from our fellow-creatures by language, with the general principles which fit us for acquiring the perception of things by our senses, we shall find them

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 269 - 270.

²⁰ Baird, Lecture 49.

²¹ Ibid..

to be very similar in their nature and manner of operation”.²² It is the fact that all men, regardless of the age they live in or the language they speak, are developing their use of language from the same innate and universal traits of man that the uniformity in man’s development can be explained. As a result, when referring to different information, or the same information in different language, “the signs used in these different cases, produce the knowledge and belief in the things signified, by means of the same general principle of the human constitution”.²³ Therefore, regardless of the language or the signs used, it was clear in Reid’s mind that the elements upon which the system functions would be the same in all languages and all cultures.

Building upon these assumptions, Reid theorised that, “[L]anguage is the picture of thought and from the picture we may frequently draw pretty accurate conclusions respecting the original. Now in every language we find the essential parts of speech exactly correspondent. We may therefore conclude that the operation of the mind on which language is founded are uniform”.²⁴ Language was here used by Reid to demonstrate the universal fact, in contrast to Hume’s philosophy, that every man believes himself to be something distinct from his ideas and impressions, something which continues the same identical self when all his ideas and impressions changed. Reid maintained that, “[I]t is impossible to trace the origin of this opinion in history; for all languages have it interwoven in their original construction. All nations have always believed it. The constitution of all laws and governments, as well as the common transactions of life, suppose it.”²⁵

It must be remembered that these connections between language and first principles were seen as a tool of attack by Reid in his effort to keep the forces of scepticism and relativism at bay. Reid firmly maintained that, “what is common in

²² Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 92.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Baird, Lecture 1. Reid reflected the same contention in a published piece: “Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts; and from the picture we may draw some certain conclusions concerning the original.” Reid *Intellectual Powers*, p. 264.

²⁵ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 22.

the structure of languages, indicates an uniformity [*sic*] of opinion in those things upon which that structure is grounded. The distinction between substances, and the qualities belonging to them; between thought and the being that thinks; between thoughts and objects of thought; is to be found in the structure of all languages. And, therefore, systems of philosophy, which abolish those distinctions, wage war with the common sense of mankind.”²⁶ By illustrating his theory of first principles by drawing examples from the nature of language and its use by man in interpersonal communication, it seems understandable that Reid would go on to utilise references to language and language use in his effort to challenge and present a viable alternative to the theories of both Hume and Smith.

2. The Centrality of Natural Language in Reid’s Linguistic Theory

As witnessed in the previous chapters, Smith’s characterisations of the transition from natural language to artificial language had a profound influence on the way each theorist went on to conceptualise man’s nature. It is no less true in the case of Reid, whose investigation into the development of language helped support his philosophical enterprise. As we will see, in Reid’s case, even after the creation of artificial language, the influences of natural language were portrayed as indispensably “woven into the structure of language” and thus were depicted as playing a decisive role in shaping man’s social and moral character.²⁷ As a result, natural language retained a pervasive influence over man, and played a central role in Reid’s efforts to describe man’s constitution.

Reid argued that the key to unlocking the role of natural language was through an exploration of the origin of artificial language. Reid clearly believed that the exploration of the origin of artificial language was a useful tool in his effort to gain an understanding of man’s nature. Reid contended that, “[T]he origin of language deserves to be more carefully inquired into, not only as this inquiry may be of importance for the improvement of language, but as it is related to the present

²⁶ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 265.

subject, and tends to lay open some of the first principles of human nature”.²⁸ Like many of the philosophers of this period who dealt with the attributes of language, Reid did consider it important to address the question of how man came to construct an artificial language. Reid maintained that the following conundrum was at the core of the current Enlightenment controversy regarding the origin of language: “The difficulty which has puzzled these Philosophers so much lies all in the very first step toward language, and it is this. All Language consists of artificial signs of our thoughts. Now all artificial signs have their signification by compact. There must therefore be compacts in society before there can be language. But it seems impossible that there should be compacts without language”. While Rousseau had identified this problem earlier in the century, Reid contended that this puzzle was easily settled once the basic dynamics of the process were brought to light. “This difficulty indeed would be insurmountable”, continued Reid, “and it is evident that men could never have agreed upon artificial signs of their thoughts if they had not some natural sign of them. But it is evident that men have natural signs of looks and gestures, and tones of voice, by which they can communicate their thoughts to one another in some degree.”²⁹

It is interesting to note at this point that there is no evidence that Reid ever considered it necessary to incorporate the contemporary ‘two savages’ scenario in his exploration of the origin of language or to highlight the importance of the use of rudimentary gesture as the foundation of inter-personal communication. However, there is a possible reason for this traditional scenario’s exclusion, one brought to light by an exploration of what Reid offered up by way of example in its stead. In lieu of the ‘two savages’, Reid presented what might best be termed a ‘Robinson Crusoe’ scenario in which he proffered the example of an individual has been marooned on a foreign shore. “We have innumerable instances of navigators thrown upon some unknown coast whose Inhabitants have not the least knowledge of their Language. Yet they can easily perceive in each other not only the Signs of

²⁷ Baird, Lecture 47. See also Lecture 49.

²⁸ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 32.

²⁹ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/30, ‘Lecture 3, Culture of Nature’.

Amity or Hostility; but they can make bargains and exchange commodities". He continued, "[T]hey can ... signify their wants and to know whether they may expect supply of them, all these transactions are carried on by Natural signs which we may call the natural language of Mankind".³⁰ The goal of Reid and other theorists of the period in furnishing such a scenario was the same, namely, to illustrate the central role played by innate universal signs and gestures in acting as the catalyst for the later use of artificial language. But by presenting it in this manner, Reid emphasised the fact that there exists a form of natural language between individuals who already possess artificial language, but lack the ability to use that artificial language due to their individually unique signifying systems. Thus humans, regardless of language grouping or societal differences, always have the innate connection of universal natural language upon which they can fall back on. It was on the retention of this natural language, and its importance as a fundamental element of man's social nature, that Reid focused his attention

This 'Robinson Crusoe' scenario also served Reid in his attempt to marginalise the role of the sympathy as a necessary basis of natural language and, in turn, as the building blocks of artificial language. Rather than two savages sharing in each others' anguish through sympathy with physical pain, Reid presented the scenario of men thrown onto a foreign shore who are able to instantly use this innate and universal language to *barter* and *trade*. Therefore, in Reid's opinion, natural language does not simply demonstrate a pool of shared instinctive sympathetic responses, but rather a common understanding upon which *rational interaction* can instantly be founded. As a result, language serves not as the basis for an expansive view of the influence of language on shaping and refining our sympathetic response to others, *à la* Smith, but rather as the means by which we are able to build rational reaction to universally shared principles. The ability to advance toward this rational exploitation of natural language is no more evident than in that crucial and defining element of human civilisation, the movement toward a spoken language. As we will see later in this chapter, this distancing of language from sympathy

³⁰ Ibid.

played a crucial role in Reid's efforts to contest Smith's moral theory.

What also distinguished Reid's discussion of the relationship between natural and artificial language was his emphasis on the continued significance of natural language in shaping man's character even after the creation of artificial language. As noted earlier in this chapter, Reid judged the influence and impact of natural language, as manifest in first principles, to be so important that it defined man's very being. Natural language was interpreted by Reid as encapsulating the entirety of mankind's character, for it is in the ability to make natural connections between things signified and the innate recognition of that item, in the form of universally recognised signs, which is the central analytical tool of man's understanding. "In the testimony of Nature given by the senses", Reid asserted, "as well as in human testimony given by language, things are signified to us by signs; and in one as well as the other, the mind, either by original principles or by custom, passes from the sign to the conception and belief in the thing signified".³¹

Critically in Reid's case, this progression from natural signs to language was not merely seen as being the necessary pre-cursor to spoken language, but as the unquestionable proof of the nature of the relationship between the mind and the body. Reid, like his contemporaries, assumed natural language to be the fundamental building block upon which artificial language is constructed. What sets Reid apart was the fact that he envisioned the role of natural language as having a far greater and enduring influence than most individuals during this period. While building upon very similar assumptions common within the Scots' discourse on language during the Enlightenment, it is Reid's interpretation of the character of natural language and its continuing influence upon language, as well as man's character more generally, which seems to typify his thinking. While other theorists did extrapolate ideas of universal connection and understanding based on the inherent ability of individuals to communicate rudimentary sentiments via natural language, Reid characterised this shared ability to communicate as

³¹ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 91.

reflecting man's rational, rather than emotional, universality. This being the case, natural language did not merely represent a pool of instinctive emotions in Reid's opinion, but rather the manifestation of man's innate ability to engage in rational thought. As we will see in the next section, these assumptions were to have great effect on Reid's characterisation of the formation of artificial language.

3. The Formation of Artificial Language and the Marginalisation of Sympathy

Due to Reid's belief in the pervasive influence of natural language on man's character, it should come as little surprise that he did not believe that there was any great mystery as to how the development of artificial language came to fruition. "Our original perceptions are few", stated Reid, "compared with the acquired; but, without the former, we could not possibly attain the latter. In like manner, natural language is scanty, compared with artificial; but, without the former, we could not possibly attain the latter".³² As noted in the previous section, it was Reid's contention that, "there must have been a convention previous to any articulate sounds, when certain sounds were agreed to denote certain ideas; hence it is evident that this natural language composed of gestures and signs previous to the introduction of articulate sound or an artificial language".³³ It is the means by which this transition took place, and the implications of this transition are the central concern in Reid's discussion of artificial language.

Reid stressed, however, that sympathy was not the distinguishing characteristic upon which the transition from natural to artificial language was based. Nor, in fact, unlike language, was sympathy a distinguishing characteristic of man at all. In his discussion of the characteristics which separated man from beast, Reid stressed that language is perhaps the greatest defining characteristic of mankind. Reid asserted that, "[T]here never was a tribe of men living in society found to be without language. I mean articulate sounds invented to express their sentiments

³² Ibid.

³³ Reid, Thomas Reid's Lectures on the Fine Arts, Peter Kivy (ed.), (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) p. 32.

one to another. Yet there never was found a tribe of beasts that had any such artificial language".³⁴ He was also quick to point out that while animals engaged in sight, smell, taste, affection, and even "sympathy in the enjoyments and suffering of their owners", they were incapable of making the leap to artificial language.³⁵ In this way, Reid coupled the idea of sympathy with those instinctive and base characteristics shared by man with animals. Rather than a defining element which could serve as the basis of all those characteristics that make man so unique, sympathy was judged by Reid to be better identified with those elements of man's nature which were instinctive and not unique to man. This has the effect of marginalising the contention that sympathy could serve as a defining element of man's social and moral character, as the sentimental theorist would have one believe.³⁶

In contrast to sympathetic reactions, Reid argued that the true origins of man's unique qualities were revealed by his ability to construct an artificial language by which he could communicate his thoughts. "No man will pretend to say", asserted Reid, "that English or French, Latin or Greek, are natural to men. We see every nation has different articulate sounds which is a plain proof that they are not natural. Nature however has intended that articulate sounds should be the things by which we should express our thoughts. For if this was not the case, we might find some nation expressing their thoughts by the motions of bodies or some other means of that kind which we never did."³⁷ Reid maintained that artificial language was a pre-ordained element of our nature that is necessary for us to express our thoughts. Artificial language was not simply something we hit upon and expanded upon, as the 'two savages' scenario would suggest, but something which man was destined to attain. It was simply the next predetermined step in making the

³⁴ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/29, Lecture to treat the 'Culture of the Human Mind both in the Intellectual and Moral Powers'.

³⁵ Baird, Lecture 90.

³⁶ While the sentimentalists did acknowledge the fact that animals could also sympathise, and distinguished man's sympathetic response as more complex, and thus unique. Reid's unwillingness to expand on his correlation between man and beasts ability to sympathise seems to point to Reid's conclusion that such distinctions are specious when it comes to describing sympathetic response.

³⁷ Reid, *Lectures on the Fine Arts*, p. 32.

functions of the mind fully operable. Therefore, it was man's ability to engage in rational thought, not evolved sympathetic reactions as Smith had maintained, that marked the unique transition point between natural and artificial language use.

It would seem that, while the influence of natural language may indeed be pervasive, it was by the creation of artificial language that man became capable of participation in those inter-active communications distinguishing him from the brutes. In Reid's opinion, the catalysis for this development was man's unique sociable nature, [T]o society we owe the ability of communicating our thoughts and sentiments to each other by language. Though many brutes animals are gregarious, and have a kind of society with their kind, by which they are very helpful to one another, yet none of them was ever found to have language, by which one can communicate its knowledge and experience to another."³⁸ (See Appendix A) It is the ability to communicate via artificial signs, within the unique social realm occupied by mankind, which Reid envisioned as the fundamental dividing line separating man from the rest of God's creation.³⁹ It is, therefore, this universal character shared by all men in all ages, which Reid considered mankind's most distinguishing feature.

As a result of these assumptions about the nature of artificial language, Reid maintained that the ability to engage in the creation of an artificial language also represented the fundamental elements of man's higher reasoning and moral character: "Brutes, as far as we know, have no notion of contracts or covenants or of moral obligation to perform them. If nature had given them these notions, she would probably have given them natural signs to express them. And where nature had denied these notions, it is as impossible to acquire them by art, as it is for a blind man to acquire the notion of colours. ... [A]nd if mankind had not these

³⁸ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/30, 'Lecture Three: Culture of Nature'.

³⁹ Baird, Lecture 90, "the most sagacious brutes never framed a language to themselves - can't ply their faith".

notions by nature, and natural signs to express them by, with all their wit and ingenuity they could never have invented language.⁴⁰

In line with so much of Reid's theory, just as man's ability to reason is portrayed as facilitating language, so too, language is judged to facilitate man's ability to advance his powers of reasoning. This universal similarity also dictated that the use of artificial language was necessary for unlocking man's ability to reason. While Reid admitted that without language man might be able to retain notions of things around him both directly and upon further encounter with these stimulants as any animal is capable of doing, he did not judge man capable of abstract thought and mental composition, what he termed 'general notions' without having language to formulate such complicated thought patterns. The ability to use language allows us to comprehend such abstractions and give names to them by which to categorise and define its boundaries, distinguishing it from other abstract notions. Reid argued, "[T]ake away the name and the enclosure is removed. Like a field which has no limits to distinguish it from the contiguous ground."⁴¹ (See Appendix B)

Thus, it is through the unique instrument of language that man was able to categorise, and therefore conceptualise, the world around him. Without language, he would be incapable of bringing his perceptions into another individual's understanding, for he would lack a means of defining these perceptions. What we witness in Reid is the advancement of a theory in which reason and language mirror each other, sustain each other, and in the end and as a result, inevitably to coalesce; expanding man's personal and social potential in the process.

For it is man's ability to categorise and process such an abstract which serves the foundation for all of his more noble powers. "For reasoning", asserted Reid, "must consist of propositions and every proposition must include some general notion. We learn to form such general notions by learning language and if we had

⁴⁰ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 33.

no language we should never have learned to form them. I believe that every man will in his experience, that when he attempts to any regular train of thinking, though he does it in silence and without uttering a sound, he will find it impossible to go on without conceiving more or less the words by which his thought may be expressed and the more distinctly he cloths his thoughts with words, the more accurately he will think.” Reid continued, “[A]nd I see no reason to think that a man without society and consequently without any kind of language, would ever acquire so much of the exercises of his rational powers as to be entitled to the denomination of rational creature”.⁴² (See Appendix C)

Therefore, it was through artificial language that man comes to all higher understanding. As man’s linguistic skills came to fruition, so too did his ability to reason. He not only expresses his thoughts in words, but the thoughts themselves take on a linguistic form. Man uses linguistic categories to define concepts, and, as a result, he also uses these signifiers as the basis of internal thought. Man both speaks and thinks in the form of an artificial language, and, as a result, “[M]an without any society of his fellow men would never acquire the exercise of his rational powers. This I take to be the necessary consequence of his having no kind of language.”⁴³ In Reid’s estimation, therefore, artificial language was seen as the lynchpin of man’s ability to understand himself and as an essential tool for the formation of societal bonds with those around him.

The above analysis makes abundantly clear the importance Reid placed on role of language in bringing to light the true operation of the human mind. In his opinion, man’s ability to reason, to conceptualise the world around him, and to gain an understanding of himself and his fellow man are dependent upon language. The importance of man’s use of language in Reid’s philosophical conclusions did not end here. It would also come to exercise as well a profound influence upon his ethical theory.

⁴¹ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/30, ‘Lecture Three: Culture of Nature’.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

4. The Moral and Ethical Ramifications of Reid's Rational Construction of Language and Language Use

What has emerged from the above discussion of artificial language is that Reid considered man's use of language as lending great insight into the fundamental of man's nature, including his ethical nature. While natural signs gave rise to language, in Reid's opinion language does not always result from natural signs. Rather, man *makes* language from natural signs, and he does so, according to Reid, by virtue of an ethical character. Due to man's notions of 'moral obligation,' Reid argued, man is driven to fulfil his duty to keep his 'contracts' and 'covenants' regarding the use of the signs of language, and as a result he is able to sustain language as a reliable tool of understanding and communication.⁴⁴ Only if these 'contracts' are kept can man add to his natural language an artificial language in the form of words. Precisely how far Reid meant for the ramification of this ethical basis of language to extend will be explored later, but it is clear that he believed the very foundation of artificial language rested in a moral substrata, where man has the ability to make and maintain binding contracts built on the trust in the fair and honest use of those signs. Indeed, other animals are incapable of inventing language more complex than natural signs because they do not possess a moral sense by which to make these durable compacts and agreements necessary to create the artificial signs used in language.

A prime example of what Reid saw as the relationship of morality to language, and how he differed from Hume and Smith, is revealed in his discussion of virtue. Reid was convinced that man was predisposed by his conscience toward moral virtue. As opposed to Hume's focus on artificial virtue, Reid's contention that man has a natural devotion to virtue dramatically shifted the locus of his characterisation of language and language use. For example, Reid's major disagreement with Hume's theory of justice was that Reid maintained that man has an inherent desire

⁴⁴Reid, *Inquiry*, pp. 31 - 34.

to keep contracts, a desire which was “as natural as the emotions of gratitude and resentment”.⁴⁵ Reid claimed that Hume’s theory of justice rested on obviously specious grounds, for Hume “infers, that our notions of justice arise from the particular situation of society, without which we would have no notion of it”. Reid maintained that “children early on are sensible of injustices done them, so that this is not the effect of society, it is a principle inherent in our nature, and the rules of justice are as obvious as the principles of any of the sciences”. It was Reid’s contention that the “moral conscience prompts us immediately to the exercise of this virtue, for, there is no dictate of course more plain and universal than this, that we should withhold from no man what is his due”.⁴⁶ From this discussion of justice, it becomes clear that Reid assumed that men were essentially moral and social beings, meant that these character traits manifested themselves both in men’s intellectual rational powers as well as social affections. As a result, Reid stated in his Aberdeen lecture notes, “[T]hose notions discover themselves in all men, not by Language only but by a certain natural effections of the mind which are natural objects.”⁴⁷

Reid also attempted to re-establish the classical balance between reason and the passions, and to impugn any theory of man based upon countervailing passions. For example, in defining virtue Reid stated, in direct reference to Smith, that some theorists claim that it is “the relation of strings”, by which we sympathise with others and attempt to “bring down our own so as that they may sympathise with us”.⁴⁸ However, in Reid’s account of virtuous actions sympathy, as characterised by both Smith and Hume did not play a significant role: “The formal nature and essence of that virtue which is the object of moral approbation consists neither in prudent prosecution of our private interest,” asserted Reid, “nor in benevolent

⁴⁵ Baird, Lecture 105.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 2131/6/V/9, ‘Is Justice Natural or an Artificial Virtue?’

⁴⁸ Ibid., Lecture 96. See Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113: “he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string to which all mankind have an accord and symphony.” See Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 337: “The great pleasure of conversation and society, besides, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of the minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another.”

affections toward others, nor in qualities useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others, nor in sympathising with the passions or affections or others, and in attuning our own conduct to the tone of other men's passions; but it consists in living in all good conscience - that is, in using the best means in our power to know our duty, and acting accordingly.⁴⁹

While Reid acknowledged there are two parts to our human constitution, reason and passion, it is clear that he did not place great faith in the passions as guides to virtuous conduct. As noted earlier in this chapter, while these passions were innate in man's character, they did not make him distinct from the rest of God's creation. In line with his dismissal of sympathy in his discussion of the transition to artificial language, Reid stated, "[I]n all languages there is some name indicating our passions, which comprehend various springs of action similar to what we have in common with brutes, appetites, desires, and affections" and "common to all of them that they carry us to an object, which may be indeed resisted but not without a struggle. No judgement is required to feel their influence."⁵⁰

We also see Reid emphasised the fact that, the passions, since they do not involve free will, do not enter into the realm of moral judgement. Crucially for our purposes, Reid contented that the very nature of language inexorably leads us to this conclusion. Reid maintained that his dismissal of the passions in relation to morals is confirmed by the simple fact that all individuals know that the passions do not involve any judgement, and thus have no place in the characterisation of morals. Due to what Reid judged to be the universality of the revelation of this fact in all languages, he drew upon linguistic usage in order to confirm the nature and position of the passions in man's character. All men know it to be the case, and this is reality is confirmed by the fact that they signify this reality in the same way. Since, in Reid's words, "[E]veryone realises that unbridled passions and appetites lead to wretchedness and ruin",⁵¹ they cannot be depended upon as the fundamental

⁴⁹ Reid Works, edited by Hamilton p650, second column - quoted p. 59, Stafford

⁵⁰ Baird, Lecture 66.

⁵¹ Ibid.

building blocks of moral sentiments. It is, in fact, because “[t]he passions are such a degree of affections as deprives us of self command”, that they make reason necessary, as a means of curbing them and bringing man toward his higher purpose.⁵²

Reid maintained that man’s reason would, if only it were more perfectly developed, guide him toward an appropriate course of action. Unlike the passions, reason “operates calmly and coolly on the conduct while the passions hurry violently away”.⁵³ Though we have not reached a state where our reasoning powers have gained such perfection, we are still impelled toward that course of action. Reid opined, “[A]ll virtue consists in acting against these motives which for the present have the strongest impulse but are less rational. If a man is induced by appetite to perform any action and if reason resists that impulse the impulse of the appetite is then considered duty, decency or interest.”⁵⁴ Standing in opposition to “animal appetite”, it is reason which leads us to virtuous action.

The existence of linguistic forms by which people express their moral judgements is, in Reid’s view, a convincing argument for the objective status of these judgements. “This is the power on which all morality is founded,” asserted Reid, “when an action is performed agreeable to it, then it is called moral, if contrary to it, it is said to be immoral”.⁵⁵ Given these assumptions, it becomes clear that Reid thought that various elements of the first principles revealed, through the use of language, the existence of a universal standard from which all moral systems drew their understanding of ethics and virtue. This is due to the fact that, as are the majority of first principles effecting man’s character, the innate moral character of man is deemed by Reid to be inexorably linked to the reality of these principles as revealed through linguistic usage. Reid’s first principle maxim dictates that a certain usage persists to the conclusion that the presupposition

⁵² Ibid., Lecture 65.

⁵³ Ibid., Lecture 66.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Lecture 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Lecture 66.

underlying that usage must be correct. As a result, universal moral terms are judged to be the expression of universal moral sentiments, with the former being considered as irrefutable proof of the latter.

The confirmation of the different virtues is likewise tied to linguistic usage. For example, the terms 'wisdom' or 'courage' are considered to be virtuous. Reid believed that there is a simple reason for this: "It may be asked from what original are these conceptions formed? And when are they said to be true or false? It appears to me, that the original from which they are copied - that is, the thing conceived - is the conception or meaning which other men, who understand the language, affix to the same words."⁵⁶ Thus, in every language there are words for wisdom and for courage, and an associated idea connected with these words. All users of the language use the same word because they are all aware of the presence of the virtue which is being signified and share, due to an innate and universal understanding of this signifier, as manifested in the correct usage of that word. This necessary connection between a specific innate quality that all men can recognise and a specific word means that this connection will be found in all languages and all ages.

While the words for the concepts of wisdom and courage may vary depending upon the random vocal sounds assigned them in a particular culture, the mere existence of some specific word for that particular virtue in all cultures corroborates that it is a universal human trait. This also means that this trait is to be found in all cultures throughout time, and is given the same degree of moral approbation or disapprobation regardless of the particulars of any given societal structure. In this sense, language plays a central role in revealing the universal nature of moral sentiments, as well as the fact that these sentiments are uniform and not dependent on cultural variables. Therefore, Reid appeared to be working from the same assumptions as Hume and Smith, namely, that a system of morality would be enshrined in the society and evidenced through the use of language. Reid rejected,

⁵⁶ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 222.

however, what he judged to the apparent relativity and subjectivity evidenced in their characterisation of morality, and in turn, their characterisation of language and language use within a given society. This being the case, it was specious in Reid's opinion to look below the surface of language use in an attempt to aid in the search for the 'true' universals of man's character. As we shall see, these attempts on the part of Hume and Reid are judged by Reid to merely demonstrate an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to see the obvious truths revealed in the nature of universal language use. There was no need to look beyond the universal truths as evidenced in the core elements of universal language usage to alternative explanations based on utility or sympathy. No such ulterior motivations need be explored to justify human judgment and morality. All that was necessary was to accept the reality of the universals revealed uniformity of accepted language use and accept the standards they recognised as virtuous to be indeed virtuous.

It is important, though, to note at this juncture that Reid's interpretation of morality did not negate the idea of individual free will. Reid, heavily influenced by the Christian conception of free will, adamantly maintained that moral approbation or disapprobation necessarily implied real judgement. Though universal moral premises are encoded in man's nature, this fact did not negate the need for each individual to utilise his or her free will in acting upon these standards. By stressing the need for the conscious exercise of free will in engaging in moral conduct, Reid once again challenged the claim that sentimentalism is the basis for our moral determinations. Through this emphasis on the centrality of free will, Reid attempted to impugn both Hume's and Smith's conception of virtue, which he believed to be grounded in simple utility or the sentiments.

Free will was necessary to Reid because, "[I]t is of the highest importance to us, as moral and accountable creatures, to know what actions are in our own power, because it is for these only that we can be accountable to our Maker, or to our fellow-men in society; by these only we can merit praise or blame; in these only all our prudence, wisdom, and virtue must be employed; and, therefore, with regard to

them, the wise Author of nature has not left us in the dark".⁵⁷ It must be remembered that reason and judgement were central to Reid's thought. Man would be incapable of functioning in society without the ability to govern his actions through the use of reason. Will and reason were seen as connected by Reid, though he did not expand on this relationship, claiming that it was evident simply due to their association.

Since every man is assumed by Reid to be a moral agent who has the power to determine his own will, man is also portrayed by him as an accountable being and one capable of self-improvement. Reid asserted that, "[E]very man is led by nature to attribute to himself the free determinations of his own will, and to believe those events to be in his power which depend upon his will. On the other hand, it is self-evident, that nothing is in our power that is not subject to our will."⁵⁸ Again, this is clearly demonstrable by an examination of linguistic usage. "If any man", argued Reid, "therefore, affirms, that a being may be the efficient cause of an action, and have power to produce it, which that being can neither conceive nor will, he speaks a language which I do not understand. If he has a meaning, his notion of power and efficiency must be essentially different from mine; and, until he conveys his notion of efficiency to my understanding, I can no more assent to his opinion than if he should affirm that a being without life may feel pain."⁵⁹ This passage makes it clear that even in the affirmation of man's free will, Reid taps into the universality of that truth as evidenced in language. Language so reflects the essential nature of our being, that anyone who does not feel that free will is indeed necessary is portrayed as not speaking the same language. By this Reid did not mean that he lacks the ability to simply understand the person, but that the person's basis of understanding in general is flawed, a fact demonstrated by his inability to understand the truth behind Reid's assertion.

⁵⁷ Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (eds.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.) p. 306.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

It becomes apparent that one of the major reasons Reid chose to emphasise the use of free will and reason was tied to his efforts to counter those theories that characterised the formation of our moral understanding as bound up with the passions and sympathy. Addressing the implications of Hume's and, particularly, Smith's theory of moral sentiments which stressed the importance of sympathetic reactions, Reid feared that, "morals, necessary truths, for all determination would be reduced to matters of fact, namely, to their agreement or disagreement with the feeling".⁶⁰ In response to this, and very much in keeping with the discussion presented in relation to sympathy and artificial language, Reid presented a theory of morals which used a linguistically based analysis to sever sympathy from the realm of morality, enshrining reason in its place. As we shall see, this effort to isolate and disparage the role of sympathy was accomplished in large part by references to language and language use.

Another great concern of Reid was Hume's apparent emasculation of the notion of human action and, as a result, the denial of man's capacity for acting morally. In opposition to Hume's contention that the theory of necessity dictated that both men and animals reason from experience, Reid believed such an assertion effectively eliminated man's noble and distinct moral character. Repeating his normal pattern, what we witness was that Reid, in contesting Hume's theory, presented linguistic usage as the central feature of his defence of the use of free will in moral judgement.

Reid believed that the doctrine of moral liberty was attested to by experience and was supported by the common sense of mankind as revealed in their belief in this reality. As a result, men act upon the belief that they are responsible for those acts that depend upon their will. Therefore, they feel remorse and guilt when they fail to live up to these standards, as well as forgiving those who, due to lack of capacity, cannot act in such a manner. These facts are perfectly intelligible and revealed daily in our intercourse with our fellow man. Reid argued that, due to the

⁶⁰ Baird, Lecture 50.

overwhelming evidence of everyday life in support of this reality, the burden of proof rested with the advocates of necessity to disprove the reality demonstrated in our everyday interaction. Reid maintained that if it cannot be proved that we act from necessity then there is no need to prove the opposite, namely, that we are free agents; nor would the doctrine of necessity influence an individual's conduct. Our everyday interaction, the understanding of those around us, and us of them, all dictate the reality which is enshrined in everyday language use and understanding. The onus is on those who are unwilling to see the verification of this reality in everyday language use to disprove the truth which is being demonstrated around them every day.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that Reid believed there are two layers to the realm of morals. One is that fixed, innate and universal realm of moral axioms that is revealed by shared signifiers and signs in everyday linguistic usage. The other realm revolved around the use of the individual's free will in deciding whether or not to follow the dictates of these universal and immutable standards. The former was judged by Reid to be essential to ensure that his moral theory was in keeping with the principles of common sense and first principles. The latter was brought to the fore by Reid in order to re-assert the idea of a morality revolving around rational and wilful decision as opposed to merely a sentimental or utilitarian learned reaction.

What we have witnessed in the preceding discussion is that, while Reid depended upon similar ideas as to the building blocks of linguistic proficiency, his interpretation of these premises resulted in a dramatically different characterisation of the relationship between natural and artificial language than both Hume and Smith. In an apparent effort to counter what he saw as the moral relativism of Hume and Smith earlier in the century, Reid attempted to construct an account of man's nature which re-establishes the universal gauge of morals as well as man's free will in directing individual virtuous conduct. In order to do this, Reid not only presented a concept of morality and virtue heavily influenced by linguistic

presuppositions, but also used language as a tool in his efforts to undermine the arguments supporting the theories of Hume and Smith.

5. The Ambiguity of Language and Reid's Attack on the Philosophical Presumptions of Hume and Smith

It is interesting to note that Reid's differences with Hume and Smith regarding the nature and impact of language on moral philosophy were not limited to their theoretical conclusions, but extended as well to disputes over methodology. Indeed, it is perhaps the latter which most frustrated and worried Reid. He feared that both Hume and Smith represented the end result of an ill-based, if not indeed exploitative, effort amongst modern philosophers to channel moral philosophy away from its true course. For example, Reid opened his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* by stating: "There is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words".⁶¹ He continued, "[T]o this chiefly it is owing that we find sects and parties in most branches of science; and disputes which are carried on from age to age, without being brought to an issue".⁶² Rather than seeing the reality of self-evident truths and first principles as enshrined in linguistic usage, Reid believed that the manipulation of inherent weaknesses in linguistic construction gave philosophers an opening to advance moral theories which were not only erroneous, but in fact destructive to society as a whole.

As Reid judged the fundamental principles of man to be evidenced through universal linguistic traits, it is understandable that the inherent limitations of linguistic signification, and the ambiguity that necessarily resulted, were of considerable concern to him. Having examined the centrality of language in Reid's philosophy, it is easy to understand why he concluded that this was significant. Reid's entire common sense philosophy revolved around the claim that the 'true' first principles of human nature are evidenced in, and ultimately proven by, the physical revelation inherent in natural language and further evidenced in the

⁶¹ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

unfolding of universal artificial language use. It stands to reason, therefore, that Reid would deem it necessary to address the inherent ambiguity of language as well, paying particular attention to what light it shed on the nature of man's morality.

Reid acknowledged the general concern over the ambiguity of language reflected in the Enlightenment discourse on language and morality. For he contended that, "[W]e are perplexed with the ambiguity of terms and no more than in the Theory of Morals".⁶³ On closer inspection, however, what Reid implied by this statement was dramatically different from the apprehension voiced by Hume and Smith regarding this particular matter. While Reid was concerned with the ambiguity of language, he was not troubled by the vague nature of language *per se*, but rather was apprehensive that the lack of specificity in language opened a dangerous loophole by which philosophers could manipulate the self-evident proofs offered by common sense. In fact, he believed that this was one of the major pitfalls that the 'science of man' must consciously make an effort to avoid. For those who engage in the pursuit of man's nature must never lose sight of the 'proper' meaning of words. It is, therefore, this fear of the abuse of language that prompted Reid to state with great foreboding that "the ambiguity of words, and the vague and improper application of them, have thrown more darkness upon this subject than the subtlety and intricacy of things".⁶⁴

Therefore, this trepidation regarding the ambiguity of language was not judged by Reid to be a mere prospective possibility, but as a process which was already all too prevalent. There was no better proof of this fact than in the theory of morals put forward by Hume and Smith. In Reid's opinion, these two theorists had failed to characterise properly the role of language in revealing the ultimate truths about man's character. It must be remembered that Reid maintained if one sits down and outlines the capacity, as well as the limitation, of language, one could come to a

⁶³ Baird, Lecture 91.

⁶⁴ Reid, Intellectual Powers, p. 150.

proper understanding of its crucial role in revealing man's nature. Reid argued that just because, "[T]he variety of human thoughts exceed the bounds of any language,"⁶⁵ this fact did not undermine his general theory. Nor should it give philosophers such as Hume and Smith free rein in misinterpreting language's effects or justify the misappropriation or twisting of commonly understood terms in order to advance their own counter intuitive systems.

Reid mounted his defence of these premises by focusing on the debate relating to the ambiguity of abstract concepts. Disagreeing with Locke regarding the almost insurmountable difficulty expressing abstract ideas via language, Reid concluded Locke's contentions were ill based.⁶⁶ In contrast, Reid maintained that: "There may be some abstract and general conceptions that are difficult or even beyond the reach of persons of weak understanding; but there are innumerable which are not beyond the reach of children. It is impossible to learn language without acquiring general conceptions; for there cannot be a single sentence without them. I believe the forming of these, and being able to articulate the sounds of language, make up the whole difficulty that children find in learning language at first."⁶⁷ Of particular interest to Reid was this latter means by which man came to an understanding of abstract concepts without ever actually defining them. Rather than basing the 'solution' to the ambiguity problem in an effort to produce precise definitions as Locke had argued was necessary, Reid maintained that there was no other means of coming to an understanding of such terms, other than through use.

The main reason why such conceptions do not lend themselves to definition is because these principles are part of our natural character, and thus do not need defining in order to reveal their existence. Reid reasoned that a definition was "nothing else but an explication of the meaning of a word, by words whose

⁶⁵ Baird, Lecture 50.

⁶⁶ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 250. "Mr. Locke expresses (too strongly indeed) of the difficulty of framing abstract general ideas, and the pains and skills necessary for that purpose. From which the Bishop infers, that a thing so difficult cannot be necessary for communication by language, which is so easy and familiar to all sorts of men."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

meaning is already known". As a result:

It is evident that every word cannot be defined; for the definition must consist of words; and there could be no definition, if there were not words previously understood without definition. Common words, therefore, ought to be used in their common acceptation; and, when they have different acceptations (*sic*) in common language, these, where it is necessary, ought to be distinguished. But they require no definition. It is sufficient to define words that are uncommon, or that are used in an uncommon meaning.⁶⁸

Reid argued that the majority of such indefinable words emerged from the innate and universal nature of first principles upon which man's understanding is based. He contended there was no need to define such abstractions. Nor did man have any capacity to do so, even if he so desired.

Reid asserted that the "poverty of language" was also the reason why "many of the names of the virtues have an ambiguity - yet must be understood at some level in order to be deemed a virtue".⁶⁹ Reid maintained that we come to an understanding of what is virtuous through interaction and conversation with our fellow man. Since all these other individuals will use the terms fixing the limits of virtue in a like manner, the more we converse with our fellows, the more we increase our understanding of its parameters. Though perhaps, if pressed, we could not in fact offer a clear and concrete definition of a particular virtue, Reid concludes that this does not mean that we do not have an understanding of it. Thus, the basic ideals of virtue, however blurred at the edges, are "interwoven into our language and we consider the man divested of them, as divested of the best and noblest powers of human nature, as really deficient in what properly belongs to a man".⁷⁰ Moral determinations were conceived by Reid as an operation of mind and

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

⁶⁹ Baird, Lecture 103.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Lecture 105.

are therefore internal. As a result, they cannot be defined and are characterised as being extremely complex. Though we have some conception of it, from a definitional point they “cannot be understood by those who have them.”⁷¹

This does not mean that man is unaware of these moral determinations, or that he lacks ability to act upon these amorphous and abstract concepts. Reid contended that: “if we attend to the cause of this indistinctness, we shall find that there is no definition of them that has authority. Their meaning, therefore, has not been learned by definition, but by a kind of induction, by observing to what individuals they are applied by those who understand the language. We learn by habit to use them as we see others do, even when we have not a precise meaning annexed to them.”⁷² Through man’s interactions in society, therefore, he becomes aware of moral determinations, their character, and their parameters without actually being able to define them clearly and specifically even after he becomes fully aware of them.

Use, then, was in Reid’s view the ultimately the ‘arbiter of language’. This being the case, common usage should take precedence over more specific, or defined, usage when it comes to such ambiguous subject matters as ideas of virtue. “When we speak of making an impression of the mind”, Reid argued, “the word is carried still farther from its literal meaning; use, however, which is the arbiter of language, authorise this application of it - as when we say that admonition and reproof make little impression on those who are confirmed in bad habits. The same discourse delivered in one way makes a strong impression on the hearers, delivered another way, it makes no impression at all.”⁷³ This process of acculturation and use is crucial to Reid, as is his understanding of how such ambiguous terms are brought into our gambit of understanding. Through social interaction, man builds up an understanding of appropriate and inappropriate expressions of those concepts embodied in the innate character of the first principles of morality.

⁷¹ Ibid., Lecture 92.

⁷² Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 237.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 147.

By presenting an explanation of the ambiguity of words based on common sense, Reid attempted to make his theory of the mind truly comprehensive. By giving a first principle based explanation of the reason behind such ambiguities, Reid established that the linguistic construct which results from these principles was not hindered by the ambiguity of language, but rather was proven by it. Definable abstract terms, as well as whole range of undefined, but nevertheless tangible, conceptions known and identifiable by all, resulted in a system in which the prevailing linguistic usage reigns supreme. But, unlike Hume, the basis of Reid's theory was built upon innate first principles. This significant distinction necessarily led Reid to the conclusion that this process would be duplicated in the same manner in all societies regardless of the cultural or linguistic differences, and would be founded upon a universal and uniform understanding of even the most indefinable of abstract concepts. It was Reid's conclusion that, "[A]s in every language there are words common to the vulgar equally as to the philosopher we need no explanation, so in every science there are principles we admit of no proof. All men of common understanding agree in them and justly consider the man who denies them as lunatic. It is in vain to reason with such a man, before we reason with any one we must be in possession of some uncontravened first principles to which we could appeal as a standard."⁷⁴

Reid conceded that in a perfect, scientifically systematic, world the ability to rectify the problems surrounding the ambiguity of language would be addressed by building a system based on clear definition and self-evident axioms. "If all the general words of a language had a precise meaning", asserted Reid, "and were perfectly understood, as mathematical terms are, all verbal disputes would be at an end, and men would never seem to differ in opinion, but when they differ in reality". This, however, is far from being the case, Reid continued, because "the first principles of natural philosophy are of a quite different nature from

⁷⁴ Baird, Lecture 4.

mathematical axioms: they have not the same kind of evidence, nor are they necessary truths, as mathematical axioms are".⁷⁵ Later, Reid elaborated on this issue:

The meaning of most general words is not learned, like that of mathematical terms, by an accurate definition, but by the experience we happen to have, by hearing them used in conversation. From experience we collect their meaning by a kind of induction; and, as this induction is, for the most part, lame and imperfect, it happens that different persons join different conceptions to the same general word; and, though we intend to give them the meaning which use, the arbiter of language, has put upon them, this is difficult to find, and apt to be mistaken, even by the candid and attentive. Hence, in innumerable disputes, men do not really differ in their judgements, but in the way of expressing them.⁷⁶

Reid, therefore, presented the ambiguity of language neither as an inherent flaw nor as presenting an insurmountable impediment to the systematic exploration of man's character in general, or his moral sentiments in particular. For the intrinsic ambiguity of language was not judged a limitation in Reid's mind. Rather, ironically, it was depicted as offering further substantiation of the fundamental and universal nature of man. The inability to define all of man's more abstract thoughts, and the universal pattern adopted to deal with this situation, in fact went far to *substantiate* that uniformity.

In the end, it is clear that Reid believed that he had quite adequately dealt with the 'problem' of ambiguity in language within his own theory. The real problem lay in the failure of other theorists to see the truth of his position: "In all languages there are phrases which have distinct meaning; while, at the same time, there may be something in the structure of them that disagrees with the analogy of grammar

⁷⁵ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 151. Reid defined an axiom as: "self-evident truths, that are necessary, and are not limited to time and place, but must be true at all times and in all places. The truths attested by our senses are not of this kind; they are contingent, and limited to time and place....If the word axiom be put to signify every truth which is known immediately, without being deduced from any antecedent truth, then the existence of the objects of sense may be called an axiom; for my senses give me as immediate conviction of what they testify, as my understanding gives of what is commonly called an axiom" (*Intellectual Powers*, pp. 202 - 203).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

or with the principles of philosophy. And the reason is, because language is not made either by grammarians or philosophers.” Reid cites the example that in common parlance we speak of ‘feeling pain’, as if pain was something distinct from the feeling of it, talk of pain coming and going, and moving from one place to another. “Such phrases are meant by those who use them in a sense that is neither obscure nor false”, Reid opined, “[B]ut the philosopher puts them into his alembic, reduces them to their first principles, draws out of them a sense that was never meant, and so imagines that he had discovered an error of the vulgar”.⁷⁷

The true conundrum rested, then, in the fact that: “The principles of natural philosophy have, in modern times, been built upon a foundation that cannot be shaken, and that they can be called in question only by those who do not understand the evidence on which they stand. But the ambiguity of the words *cause*, *agency*, *active power*, and the other words related to these, has led many to understand them, when used in natural philosophy, in a wrong sense, and in a sense which is neither necessary for establishing the true principles of natural philosophy, nor was ever meant by the most enlightened in that science.”⁷⁸ It also followed that if there was universal and uniform agreement on this front, philosophers must restrict their analysis to the inherent truth revealed by such patterns. Reid feared, however, that many philosophers could not accept the explanation proffered by these first principles. Too often there was a vast gap between what philosophers derived from the language and what the vast majority saw as self-evident truths revealed in daily linguistic usage. This problem manifested itself in various forms and in many guises. To Reid, however, modern philosophers all too often abused these self-evident truths, and were unwilling to look at the reality which was before them in favour of creating ill based pseudo-scientific axioms.

According to Reid, the problems associated with language had been more successfully excluded from mathematics and the natural sciences, since the former had as its very essence the ability to define accurately the terms of use and to

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

provide axioms which dictate exactly how numbers relate and correlate. As for the latter, Reid believed that the two centuries leading up to the eighteenth century had witnessed more advances in science than had the past two thousand years. He attributed this to the natural sciences' ability to draw lessons from mathematics and to formulate hypotheses in line with mathematical principles. With respect to philosophy, however, Reid did not believe that the definitional certainty of the hard sciences could be reached, simply because there were no 'definitions' to be found. One could, however, lay down general principles, "for the sake of those who are less conversant in this branch of logic".⁷⁹

One of the greatest errors pointed out by Reid in the works of other philosophers of the mind, such as Hume and Smith, was their attempt to define the indefinable. For, as we have noted, Reid's theory dictates that the words that describe the most simple, yet fundamental, operations of the mind are characterised as not lending themselves to definition. Certain concepts simply cannot be defined, yet every man understands the meaning of the words, and has a clear and distinct notion of them. One can, however, explain the meaning of a word without actually defining it. These are operations of the mind, or consciousness, which are immediately known to us internally, and do not have an external object, and thus there is no need to have a sign and signifier relationship. These elements make up the constitution of the mind itself, and thus determine the scope and range of operations that the mind has the capacity to perform.⁸⁰

Unwilling to accept, or critically understand, the first principles revealed by language and the reasons behind the necessary ambiguity of language, Reid maintained that many in the contemporary philosophical community were creating a vast gap between themselves and the common man. This fact was evidenced when Reid warned, "[I]t ought likewise to be observed, that although philosophers, for the sake of being understood must speak the language of the vulgar - as when

⁷⁸ Reid, *Active Powers*, p.309.

⁷⁹ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 130.

⁸⁰ Lehrer, p. 83.

they say, the sun rises and sets, and goes through all the signs of the zodiac - yet they often think differently from the vulgar".⁸¹ As we will see in the following section, it was this conflict over the usage of language that Reid judged to be one of the most troublesome elements of the contemporary debate regarding the 'science of man', and why, in this struggle between philosopher and the common man, Reid was keen to point out that, "I find myself classed with the vulgar."⁸²

6. Honesty of Usage: Linguistic Veracity and Philosophical Subterfuge

As noted in the previous section, Reid readily admitted that language did not lend itself to clear definition. But unlike many early modern theorists, he did not believe that this was an impediment to communication. Rather, these ambiguities were regarded as revealing great truths about man's inherent nature. In Reid's mind, the *real* danger with the vagueness of language rested not in its perceived hindrance on communication of moral sentiments, but rather that it had left a degree of ambiguity around certain terms which other theorists were exploiting for their own benefit. For the failure of these other theorists to truly understand the vague nature of language not only led them away from the inherent truth enshrined in linguistic usage but, even more intolerably, the ambiguity itself allowed a degree of interpretative room that resulted in the twisting of language and terminology into definitions far removed from their actual meaning. Thus, not only were philosophers failing to see the truth, but through their insistence in misusing language, they were also leading the rest of mankind away from the truth. To Reid, the theories of Hume and Smith served as prime examples of this corrupting force. Not only did these individuals fail to see the clear philosophical lesson demonstrated by the ambiguity of language, but they also twisted language from its predestined course in order to serve their own theories. It was an intolerable state of affairs in Reid's mind, and a pattern of inquiry that he felt compelled to rectify.

⁸¹ Reid, *Active Powers*, p. 310.

⁸² Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 176.

Due to the temper of Reid's methodology and its dependence on both natural and artificial language as the means of verifying and clarifying the world around us, it is not surprising that Reid stressed the importance of veracity in language use. What we also discover is that this emphasis on veracity played a notable role in Reid's efforts to legitimise his common sense philosophy and undermine both Hume and Smith. In this latter context, Reid insisted that the opportunity for abuse due to the vagueness of language, particularly with regard to the more abstract areas of thought, had furnished contemporary moral philosophers a means to twist the clear meaning, and implications, of language toward dubious ends. In order to forward their own agendas, Reid argued, the contemporary discussion moral philosophy made a mockery out of the language itself and, as a direct result, 'modern philosophy' was "in reality, when examined to the bottom, nothing else but an abuse of words".⁸³ It is this accusation regarding 'abuse of words' which came to play a central role in Reid's effort to refute the moral theories of both Hume and Smith.

Let us first, however, enquire into Reid contention that veracity was so essential to his conception of man's nature and, the corollary to this, that man must have faith in the common definition of words. This element of Reid's philosophy can be traced back to his suggestion that the reason we believe in the existence of anything was based ultimately upon the foundation of natural signs. This premise dictated that when two things are constantly conjoined together in the mind, the appearance of one of them makes us immediately think of the other. The former was judged by Reid as the natural sign of the latter, and this constant conjunction in the past, gives us confidence in their constant conjunction in the future as well. This process is so natural to our mind that we do not even dwell upon how it occurs but merely take the reality of this connection as a self-evident truth. This assumption extends beyond the uniform signifier use and further implies the necessity of veracity in inter-personal communication as well. In turn, this leads to a faith in the uniformity and accuracy of the linguistic assumptions, which are so necessary for

⁸³ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 68.

man to function and to create a social universe. The ability to recognise the legitimacy of this system allows us to confirm both the predictability of the physical universe and our own human nature.⁸⁴

As a result of these assumptions, Reid's common sense philosophy endeavoured to illustrate, "the general principles of the human mind which fit us for receiving information from our fellow-creatures, by the means of language".⁸⁵ Due to this fact, veracity in usage was judged by Reid to be the very cornerstone of artificial language, and, in turn, morality and sociability. For, in order for us to function as individuals, or to understand the human condition generally, we must gain information from those around us. Reid maintained that prior to any experience, use of our faculty of reason, compact or promise, "our fellow-creatures will use the same signs in language, when they have the same sentiments".⁸⁶ It was Reid's contention that, "[T]his is, in reality, a kind of prescience of human actions; and it seems to me to be an original principle of the human constitution, without which we should be incapable of language, and consequently incapable of instruction".⁸⁷

The vehicle for this understanding was language. Reid stated that, "[W]hen we try to prove that there is life and intelligence in the creatures with whom we converse in society, laying aside our natural conviction, no other reason can be given for it but that their minds are so like our own that we judge them to proceed from the same thoughts, reasoning from the same similarities of the effects to the same source of the causes".⁸⁸ Without this connection with others 'thought and

⁸⁴ For example, Reid points out the temperature at which water freezes today, will be assumed to be the same temperature which will freeze it tomorrow. Citing Hume, Reid states that our belief in the predictability of natural laws is not derived from reason. Rather, Reid asserts it is an "instinctive prescience of the operation of nature, very like to that prescience of human actions which makes us rely upon the testimony of our fellow-creatures; and as, without the latter, we should be incapable of receiving information from men by language, so, without the former, we should be incapable of receiving information of nature by means of experience". (*Inquiry*, p. 100).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸⁸ Baird, Lecture 49.

feeling' we could have no language, no intercourse with other men.⁸⁹ Since language use requires shared assumptions about what is and is not signified, we must also assume that those around us are using language in like manner to ourselves. This is a fundamental element of man's nature and the key to his advancement. "The wise and beneficent Author of Nature," asserted Reid, "who intended that we should be social creatures, and that we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by the information of others, hath, for these purposes, implanted in our nature two principles that tally with each other".⁹⁰ The first of these principles is a propensity to speak the truth, "and to use the signs of language so as to convey our real sentiments".⁹¹ The second is, "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us".⁹² In order for this to occur, the veracity of linguistic use must be established.

Yet, if, in Reid's view, the existence of language was necessary for the establishment of an ethical system, it would seem that he also believed that rudimentary innate ethics, and a leaning toward veracity in particular, were just as necessary for the establishment of language. In treating the rational principles of action, Reid discussed the topic of moral first principles, demonstrating again his devotion to the universal common sense of man. Moral first principles, according to Reid, required only that the one considering their truth be of mature understanding and unprejudiced judgement in order to ascertain their legitimacy. For example, at one point Reid discussed the tendency to believe the authority of another human being. Reid explained that in the human constitution there exists, "an early anticipation, neither derived from experience, nor from reason, nor from any compact or promise, that our fellow-creatures will use the same signs, when they have the same sentiments. When an individual speaks in an attitude of good will, we understand that he will use the same language he or she has used on

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 93.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁹² Ibid., p. 95.

previous occasions when his attitude has been similar.”⁹³ Accordingly, the person is convinced of its truthfulness because of his own nature, and is innately qualified to judge the evidence when it is presented fairly and truthfully, and when the mind is unprejudiced. This contention has implications for the communicator as well as the listener. The speaker is obliged to employ evidence truthfully and fairly, and the listener is equally obliged to unshackle his mind from encumbering biases related to the matter upon which he would judge. A two-way relationship of trust is thus established.

It was Reid’s contention that man was naturally inclined to use language truthfully, to reveal his true opinions and sentiments, and also to believe that others do the same. To use language untruthfully, presenting unfair or prejudiced evidence to the other party was in Reid’s judgment a violation of the very nature of man as well as a threat to human society, which is based on, and possibly even created in reliance on, veracity in the use of language. Language was regarded by Reid as the embodiment of a fundamental social contract, a contract whose terms dictated that one must use signs in a given manner. If this contract was violated by the unethical use of those signifiers, all other contracts and agreements among men are challenged, since they are grounded in the truthful use of language.

This interplay and circular relationship between language and morals continued throughout the work of Reid, drawing parallels between their foundations and development within the social context. It would seem that, in Reid’s opinion, if these two elements had not been present from the beginning, the initial germination of civilisation would not have taken place. Once having taken place, this interaction must continue to be honoured and preserved.

As a consequence of this two-way relationship between language and veracity, Reid also believed there was yet another original, and divinely implanted, principle: that man has a pre-disposition to assume the veracity of the statement of others, and

⁹³ Ibid., p. 93.

hence to believe what others tell him. This Reid termed '*the principle of credulity*', a power thought by Reid to be limitless in children, until they encounter deceit and falsehood as their experience of the world widens. Despite this experience, Reid maintained that we still tend to believe the truthfulness of others throughout our lives. If this were not the case, we would have no inclination to believe anything that was told to us until we had positive evidence of its truthfulness. Reid argued that this was not the case, and that we assumed truthfulness unless there was clearly reason not to do so.⁹⁴ As a result, Reid stated, "[S]uch distrust and incredulity would deprive us of the greatest benefits of society, and place us in a worse condition than that of savages".⁹⁵ Otherwise, for example, children would be absolutely incredulous and thus unable to be educated, for the ability to adopt manners and judge personal character would be made impossible.

We therefore witness a concerted effort on the part of Reid to prove that revelations about the innate truths of human nature ultimately rest upon fundamental assumptions regarding the truthfulness of linguistic human interaction. It is clear that, for Reid, language revealed all we can know about our nature. His theory judged the medium of language to be the intermediary between the reality that is human nature and our understanding of that reality. For this to take place, the medium of transmission must not only be trustworthy, but must also be acknowledged that language has encoded within it these universal truths. We must, therefore, trust not only each other, but also the medium itself. For the language in common use is the *very embodiment* of common sense.

This being the case, it was Reid's contention that "in matters of common sense, the few must yield to the many, when local and temporal prejudices are

⁹⁴ While Reid shares Pufendorf's general view as to the contractual relationship of language, it is unclear what Reid would make of Pufendorf's contentions regarding 'white lies' or that one need only speak truthfully to another person if you have some obligation to do so. Reid would seem to contend that such a selective process is not only counter-productive to society, but perhaps not even possible at all. Given Reid's paradigm, in which the honest use of language is seen as so essential, Pufendorf's contention that there is only a selective duty to use language truthfully based on a myriad of personal obligations would most likely be deemed as completely unworkable.

⁹⁵ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 95

removed”.⁹⁶ The reason why this basic principle must be followed is because “men sometimes lead us into mistakes, when we perfectly understand their language, by speaking lies. But Nature never misleads us in this way: her language is always true; and it is only by misinterpreting it that we fall into error.”⁹⁷ It becomes clear that our innate proclivity toward veracity and credulity were in Reid’s mind not merely tools to make our functioning in daily life possible, but the use of language was depicted as a truth-revealing undertaking in itself. If language were allowed to take its natural course, and if individuals use the terms of that language in their conventional manner, than they would also be facilitating the exposure of the inherent truths of man’s nature embodied in language. However, what must be avoided, at any cost, is any action by a minority, intentionally or not, to divert linguistic use away from this natural course.

Reid insisted that one of the most egregious problems facing philosophy was that these ill-based theories drew their philosophical conclusions by twisting words and language into forms that severed them from their true and natural course. Not merely did these philosophers miss the obvious proof that the use of language revealed, modern philosophy was attempting to hijack the language itself, and was twisting its terms in such a manner as to make the guiding first principles of mankind inaccessible and misleading. Reid contended that, “[W]hen we use common words, we ought to use them in the sense in which they are most commonly used by the best and purest writers of the language; and, when we have occasion to enlarge or restrict the meaning of a common word, or give it more precision than it has in common language, the readers ought to have warning of this, otherwise we shall impose upon ourselves and upon him”.⁹⁸ The reason for this was simple: “The vulgar have undoubted right (*sic*) to give names to things which they are daily conversant about; and philosophers seem justly chargeable with an abuse of language, when they change the meaning of a common word, without giving warning. If it is a good rule, to think with philosophers and speak with the vulgar, it must be right to speak with

⁹⁶ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 259.

⁹⁷ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 102.

⁹⁸ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 151

the vulgar when we think with them, and not to shock them by philosophical paradoxes, which, when put in common language, express only the common sense of mankind.”⁹⁹ Reid argued, for example, that the philosopher’s contention that colour is not a quality of the body of the object, but rather only an idea of the mind, goes against common usage of the word *colour*. After briefly re-asserting his common sense philosophy, he stated emphatically: “Philosophers have thought fit to leave that quality of bodies which the vulgar call *colour*, without a name, and to give the name of *colour* to the idea or appearance, to which, as we have shewn, the vulgar give no name, because they never make it an object of thought or reflection. Hence it appears that, when philosophers affirm that colour is not in bodies, but in the mind, and the vulgar affirm that colour is not in the mind, but is a quality of bodies, there is no difference between them about things, but only about the meaning of a word”.¹⁰⁰ (See Appendix D) If the philosophers had agreed with the common usage and had given the name of *colour* to the cause, as they should have done, “[T]heir language, as well as their sentiments, would have been perfectly agreeable to the common apprehensions of mankind, and true Philosophy would have joined hands with Common Sense”.¹⁰¹ It becomes apparent that Reid was pitting the philosopher against the people, and characterising the latter as the genuine holders of the truth, and the former as the antagonist in their ill-based attempt to gain an accurate understanding of man’s nature.

This analogy was carried forward by Reid into his discussion of what he believed to be the most egregious effort to undermine language’s common usage, the attempts of theorists to create definitions of ethical terms. Reid stated: “As if we found a language in which were names to divide the various colours and all great variety of shades in each, we would conclude infallibly that the language had eyes to discern colour, so from the various names to distinguish virtue and also the particular virtues, that as found in all language we may safely conclude, that all

⁹⁹ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 68 - 69.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 70.

men have a process to distinguish virtue from vice, right from wrong.¹⁰² As with the case of distinguishing colour, Reid believed that “[I]n like manner if a man wants to know what is right and wrong, set before him some striking instances of both he will soon perceive the merit or demerit of each by this natural faculty”.¹⁰³ The eye discerns shades of colour and without this faculty, and could not proceed at all, yet “by it that we acquire the very idea of colour”.¹⁰⁴

Reid contended that in any debate regarding man’s nature, both sides should apply the same terms and definitions. In such a manner, an agreement could be made in the discussion of morals and should apply to “both parties on the question, whether the moral qualities of actions are perceived by sentiment or some feeling or reason”.¹⁰⁵ What all too often occurred, however, was an “abuse of language” by philosophers regarding external objects. As a result, the “vulgar affixing a different idea to the word do not understand him,” however, “if he explains himself they readily agree”.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, if the philosopher allowed the natural course of language to guide his enquiry, and the self-evident first principles that it necessarily revealed, then it would be possible for him to maintain his credulity. “But if he puts a different meaning upon the word”, argued Reid, “without observing it himself, or giving warning to others, he abuses language and disgraces philosophy, without doing any service to truth: as if a man should exchange the meaning of the words *daughter* and *cow*, and then endeavour to prove to his plain neighbour, that his cow is his daughter, or his daughter his cow”.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, it was Reid’s position that the manipulation of the self-evident truths revealed by language rests at the heart of his disagreement with the contemporary efforts on the part of Hume and Smith. As a result of this process, Reid alleged that many of his contemporaries “adapt their language and have ... used expressions

¹⁰² Baird, Lecture 90.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Lecture 91

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Lecture 24.

¹⁰⁷ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 26.

opposite of their sentiments".¹⁰⁸ As a result, the effort to counter this misappropriation of linguistic usage came to play an important role in Reid's efforts to confront and counter the influence of such theories.

In Reid's mind, there was no better demonstration of this misuse and manipulation of language than Hume's discussion of virtue. One of the main accusations that Reid repeatedly made against Hume and other philosophers in *Intellectual Powers* related to their "intolerable abuse of language".¹⁰⁹ Reid maintained, as did Hume, that, "disputes about words belong rather to grammarians than to philosophers". Reid, however, immediately went on to qualify this statement, "philosophers ought not to escape censure when they corrupt a language, by using words in a way which the purity of the language will not admit".¹¹⁰

Reid maintained this was problematical for three reasons, each of which related to the use and nature of language. The first reason was that, in the case of Hume, he "gives the name of perceptions to every operation of the mind, Love is a perception, hatred is a perception; desire is a perception, will is a perception; and, by the same rule, a doubt, a question, a command, is a perception. This is an intolerable abuse of the language, which no philosopher has authority to introduce."¹¹¹ The second factor related to Hume's contention that we can divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes distinguishable by their vivacity. This, argued Reid, violated Hume's conception of the basic linguistic distinction regarding the categorisation by species. "To say," stated Reid, "therefore, that two different classes, or species of perceptions, are distinguished by the degrees of their force and vivacity, is to confound a difference of *degree* with a difference of *species*, which every man of understanding knows how to distinguish."¹¹² Thirdly, Hume was guilty, in Reid's opinion, of using a 'vague and undetermined word' in the case of *impressions* which is lacking a clear definition which would distinguish

¹⁰⁸ Baird, Lecture 92.

¹⁰⁹ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, pp. 144 - 145, 147.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

what he means by the use of this word in this context. Reid went on to discuss, “the proper meaning of the *impression* in English” in order to find out the ‘truly logical’ use of the word. He then proffered a definition of common usage that, Reid maintained, stood in stark contrast to Hume’s usage.¹¹³

As noted earlier, in Reid’s philosophy, it was ultimately common usage that established the legitimacy of common sense. In the case of Hume, Reid contended that the examples cited above stand as egregious violations of this principle. “The structure of all language is grounded upon common notions”, contended Reid in the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, “which Mr. Hume’s philosophy opposes and endeavours to overturn. This, no doubt, led him to warp the common language into a conformity with his principles; but we ought not to imitate him in this, until we are satisfied that his principles are built on a solid foundation.”¹¹⁴ Reid went on to point out in a later passage: “We know of nothing that is in the mind but by consciousness, and we are conscious of nothing but various modes of thinking; such as understanding, willing, affection, passion, doing, suffering. If philosophers choose to give the name of an idea to any mode of thinking of which we are conscious, I have no objection to the name, but that introduces a foreign word into our language without necessity, and a word that is very ambiguous, and apt to mislead”.¹¹⁵

Another illustrative example of Reid’s utilisation of a linguistically based refutation of Hume is to be found in the student notes of Reid’s unpublished Glasgow University Moral Philosophy Lectures from 1779 - 1780. Hume, it will be remembered, presented in the *Enquiry* an Appendix entitled ‘Of Some Verbal Disputes’, a tract that emphasised language’s inability to capture the nuances of the sentiments. It is interesting to note that Reid not only devoted a vast majority of a lecture to countering specifically Hume’s ‘Of Some Verbal Disputes’, but indeed

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 147.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 231.

this particular lecture concluded his series of Moral Philosophy Lectures at Glasgow. Since this particular tract is generally regarded to be of little import in traditional interpretations of the *Enquiry*, it is very curious that it singled by Reid and deemed worthy of such a lengthy and strategically placed reproach.

In unpacking this topic, Reid began the lecture with a discussion of Hobbes and Mandeville. The greater genius, in Reid's opinion, was Mandeville who "takes advantage of all the ambiguity of terms, giving to every passion or affection that odious name which has in its [illegible] excesses. Pride is associated with self-approbation, vanity, flattery, luxury", "all love of the sex is lust". and "all virtue is the offspring of flattery begot by pride".¹¹⁶ It was Reid's opinion that such a characterisation of man's moral character resulted in a system of morality in which there is no such thing as virtue in human conduct. Reid contended that the root of the ill-based conception of this system, "is founded on the ambiguity of language".¹¹⁷

By tracing this 'abuse' of the ambiguity of language back to Hobbes and Mandeville, Reid appears to have been attempting to establish that linguistic abuse lies at the very heart of contemporary developments in moral relativism and sceptical reasoning. Citing the intellectual precursors to this developing line of reasoning, Reid appears to be attempted to prove, if not a conspiracy, at least a long-standing misdirection in the use and understanding of the nature and role of language in coming to an understanding of man's nature. Reid thus appears to be establishing the 'pedigree' by which this ill-founded line of enquiry had been able to gain a foothold in moral theory. It was only through the misappropriation of language, and a corresponding misunderstanding of its nature, that this line of philosophical enterprise had been able to develop and gain ascendancy. By beginning with this discussion of what Reid judged to be the progenitors of this

¹¹⁶ Baird, Lecture 98.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

methodological mistake, and linking both Hume and Smith to it, Reid was able to link these later philosophers not only to this abuse of language, but also to the philosophical repercussions which result from it.

Having established this ill-based philosophical lineage, Reid proceeded to deal with “Mr. Hume’s elaborate theory of virtue”, namely, “that virtue is no more than the qualities that are agreeable to ourselves or others or that are useful to ourselves or others”.¹¹⁸ Reid feared that the sceptical basis of Hume’s moral theory would lead to a moral relativism which would cause man to approve of vice as well as virtue. Reid did not think it right to conclude that such actions as ‘oppression, corruption and venality’ could simply amass a large following and lead to them becoming admired because they prove to be useful to the individual.¹¹⁹ “But Mr. Hume thinks”, opined Reid, “it is wholly to the caprice of language that the former are not called virtues and the latter vices”, an assertion which Reid found to be patently “absurd.”¹²⁰

It is clear from the tone of the lecture that this assertion by Hume, that moral distinctions are traceable merely to the caprice of language, was a major bone of contention for Reid. He stated, “[I]t is not easy to say what Mr. Hume means by the caprice of language. There are undoubtedly defects in language but they are defects of a contrary notion to what he supposes”; differences “which are not distinguished, where it is not necessary to the affair of common life that such distinctions should be made, but there is no instance of a distinction being made in all languages between things but what are really different”.¹²¹ Reid maintained that: “If there is really a moral rectitude and fortitude discerned by the moral faculty, the language of men will be perfectly simple and intelligible. Men then speaking of

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., See Hume, *Appedix IV: Of Some Verbal Disputes*, “A moral, philosophical discourse needs not enter into all these caprices of language, which are so variable in different dialects, and in different ages of the same dialect”, Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 148.

judging, condemning, ought and ought not, we are perfectly understood and need not express ourselves by a strange circumlocution of which there is no similar use in any language".¹²²

It is easy to see why Reid felt threatened by Hume's sweeping dismissal of moral distinctions as simply examples of the caprice of language. With a single word, 'caprice', Hume can be seen as completely undermining Reid's conception of immutable and universal standards of virtue and morality. To Reid, the distinctions attributable to linguistic usage were *anything but* examples of caprice. It was, in fact, the approach to language and morals proffered by Hume that undermined the entire effort to establish a legitimate 'science of man'. As a result, this passing reference to 'caprice' by Hume was singled out as the prime example of where the sceptical and relativism of the present moral theory developing in Scotland was heading.

Reid proceeded to give yet another example of what he sees as a misuse by Hume, citing Hume's seeming admission at one point regarding the guiding influence of common sense and right reason in the discernment of moral distinctions. Reid found Hume's use of the word reason "different from original meaning" and used in an "uncommon sense" which "cannot be justified by the authority of any single philosopher".¹²³ Yet this assertion conflicts, Reid argued, with Hume's assertion that reason must be the slave of the passions. "He lays it down", argued Reid, "in a very peremptory manner that there is a language which is as [impossible] to make intelligible".¹²⁴ Reid finds this to be a "shocking paradox" if we understand it in the liberal and common sense of the word 'reason'.¹²⁵ In

¹²² Baird, Lecture 101.

¹²³ Ibid., Lecture 67.

¹²⁴ Ibid., Lecture 94.

¹²⁵ Ibid., Lecture 92.

order to back up his claim, Reid offered language as proof: "they who say it is an error to call it reason, must surely account for it getting this name and also for the universality of that name".¹²⁶

Throughout the rest of this lecture, Reid systematically dissected Hume's inconsistent usage. In the face of what Reid termed 'plain English',¹²⁷ he proceeded to use the universality of language against Hume.¹²⁸ For example, Reid accused Hume of using sentiment, feeling, and internal sense as equivalent "and into them he resolves all moral obligations, without attempting at all to explain the words".¹²⁹ Reid argued that the relation between language and first principles revealed the fact that there are universal similarities in the operation of the mind as well. Likewise, when discussing the operation of the mind, by which Hume meant an entire spectrum of things - seeing, desiring, willing - Reid stated "[I]n the structure of all languages, they are considered as acts or operations of the mind itself, and the names given them imply this. To call them impressions, therefore, is to trespass against the structure, not of a particular language only, but of all languages."¹³⁰ In the end, it seems clear that through accusations of systematic misunderstanding, misuse and abuse of language, Reid hoped to strengthen his argument that Hume's entire theoretical enterprise was completely misguided.

Nor does Smith escape these accusations of linguistic misuse levelled by Reid. It would seem that Reid did not maintain nearly the same degree of foreboding in relation to Smith's moral theory, perhaps because Smith's theory does preserve a sub-stratum of universal moral uniformity. Nevertheless, Reid found Smith's theory of moral sentiments to be misjudged, based predominantly on what Reid regarded to be examples of the subversion of proper language use. For example, in the Birkwood Collection, which comprises Reid's reflections while at the University of Aberdeen, Reid began his remarks regarding Smith's systems of

¹²⁶ Ibid., Lecture 66.

¹²⁷ Reid, *Inquiry*, p. 101.

¹²⁸ Baird, Lecture 94

¹²⁹ Ibid., Lecture 92.

morals with the contention that Smith not only changes his definition of sympathy throughout his work, but also that he failed to define sympathy, “as is necessary to make it the foundation of a distinct Theory of Morals”. Reid agreed with Smith’s initial assessment of what sympathy entails, namely, “every passion pleasant as well as painful, the emotions of the bystander correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the Sufferer. And that this disposition of the human mind is what we call Sympathy”. This is true because the etymology of the word according to Reid plainly points to this meaning in the English language. However, Reid goes on to say that as Smith’s presentation of his theory of moral sentiments progressed, his characterisation of sympathy took on an understanding wholly alien to this commonly understood meaning of sympathy. Rather, “Dr. Smith makes his Sympathy to correspond not to what the person sympathised with reality & actually suffers or enjoys but what he should suffer or enjoy. ... I conceive this meaning of the word Sympathy is altogether new & that if one had not a hypotheses to serve by it he would never have dreamed that it is Sympathy that makes us blush for the imprudence and rudeness of another.”¹³¹

It is clear in this passage that Reid sees Smith’s novel interpretation of what sympathy actually entails as a clear example of a theorist twisting the true meaning of a word, and the necessary universals reflected in that usage, into something completely different in order to forward their own assumptions and conclusions about man’s character. Reid argued that Smith’s latter characterisation of sympathy was in fact Antipathy, and that even if we do use Smith’s verbiage, that in the end it is Smith’s point is that in the judging of morality is our feeling the emotions of another that we ought to feel but do not feel, that this supposed a moral judgement and consequently a moral faculty. There is no need it would seem in Reid’s opinion to resort to twisting the meaning of sympathy in order to somehow

¹³⁰ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 148.

¹³¹ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS.2131/3/I/28.

cover up the fact that in the end it is indeed an innate moral faculty at its base. Such efforts again only blur, distort, and lead mankind away from discovering the much more obvious truths as evidenced in acceptable linguistic usage and common sense. (See Appendix E)

In addition, while Reid agreed with Smith that we can only judge the sight of others by our sight, assume what others hear is the same as we hear, that others will reason in a similar way to the way we reason, he did argue that Smith failed to carry his analogy to its logical conclusion:

In these instances I agree with him. The eye must ultimately be the ultimate judge of objects of vision. The faculty of taste in like manner the objects of taste and the faculty of reason in objects of reasoning; and I add that in like manner the moral faculty is that by which we must ultimately judge of morals. And so it is with regard to every original power of judging. But this must be confined by our judging powers. And therefore when he adds that I judge your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love, & that I neither have nor can have any other way of judging about them. This I can by no means assent to. To judge by resentment and to judge by love *are ways of speaking altogether new*. Neither resentment nor love are judging faculties, and it is impossible to judge of any thing by them. [emphasis added]¹³²

It was Reid's conclusion that, "the author uses approbation and disapprobation in too vague and figurative a sense. When he speaks at one time of the approbation of an opinion and at another time, of the approbation of actions, the word approbation is taken in different senses."¹³³ As a consequence, "[T]o this system it has also been objected that the ultimate measure of right and wrong is not fixed; it makes virtue to depend not on the truth of things but on the passions of men which differ in different persons & in the same person at different times".¹³⁴ On this front, Reid's central, and seemingly only, bone of contention is that "these theories make the common language of men to have quite different meaning from what the

¹³² Ibid., MS.2131/2/II/6.

¹³³ Ibid., Lecture 100.

structure of language will admit, these theories then are irreconcilable with the common sentiments and the common language of all mankind".¹³⁵ In contrast, Reid maintained that there is some real and tangible worth in men's actions as well as in what they ought and ought not to do. Reid supported this contention, in contrast to the one proffered by Smith, by presenting the following observation: "[T]his obligation does not depend on the constitution of the agent but on the nature of the action, moral obligation agrees to the common sense and language of mankind which is a strong support in its favour".¹³⁶

What we observe is that Reid was pre-occupied with turning the tide of what he judged to be the abuse of language by Hume and Smith in their pursuit to establish a system of morals. Reid hoped to present an alternative vision, one more soundly constructed, but equally dependent upon, assumptions about language. If his vision had become a reality, Reid was quite confident of the consequences:

But this darkness will not last for ever. Light will arise upon this benighted part of the intellectual globe. When any man is so happy as to delineate the powers of the human mind as they really are in nature, men that are free from prejudice, and capable of reflection, will recognise their own features in the picture; and then the wonder will be, how things so obvious could be so long wrapped up in mystery and darkness; how men could be carried away by false theories and conjectures, when the truth was to be found in their own breasts if they had but attended to it.¹³⁷

This florid verbiage reflects the passion Reid felt in this battle for the intellectual high-ground regarding the character and influence of language on the Scottish Enlightenment. It also eloquently illustrated that language was not just an illustrative tool or metaphorical device within the Scots' efforts to delineate the character of man's moral sentiments. If Reid was going to be successful in his attempt to turn the tide of scepticism and relativism in moral theory, then his effort

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., Lecture 101.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Reid, *Intellectual Powers*, p. 269.

necessitated a more convincing conception of language to be proffered. As we have seen, Reid appeared aware of this very fact, and endeavoured to provide just such a conception.

Conclusion

Hume, Reid and Smith all proffered theories of sociability and morality that were literally permeated with references to language and language use. From passing allusion to extended discussion, there is no doubting that references to language and language use played a role in the dissemination of their theories on these topics. Given this fact, this thesis has sought to explore if any uniform patterns emerged in their works relating to these references to language, and if so, how these references shed light both onto their understanding of their characterisation of man's nature in general, and, more particularly, on the relationship between language, sociability, and morality envisioned by them.

At the most general level these allusions to language and language use reflect the general discourse going on in both academia and popular culture during the Eighteenth Century regarding nature of language and the important role attributed to interpersonal discourse in the shaping of our social and moral character. For example, it would appear that the concurrent discussion of language and language use taking place throughout the course of the Enlightenment played a significant role in colouring the broad framework in which Hume, Smith and Reid went about constructing their individual theories. These Scottish philosophers were very much in tune with the contemporary assumptions and analytical conclusions regarding the usefulness of analysing language and language use in shedding light on both man's innate predisposition and developmental potential. Advancing this exploration into the analysis of man's sociability and morality, Hume, Reid and Smith can be seen to draw upon their epistemological conclusions regarding the nature of language in their efforts to discover what human characteristics drive man to cooperate socially and act morally.

These authors' consistent references to language and language seem also to be influenced by the general social pre-occupation with polite society and social refinement through the medium of polite conversation. Hume, Smith and Reid all

demonstrated an awareness of the importance of controlled interpersonal communication in the formation, understanding and refinement of proper moral sentiments. While each theorist constructed his own unique take on what exactly proper refinement entailed, they all seemed to share in the idea that those who wished to inter-act socially and act morally benefited greatly by consciously engaging his fellow man in conversation and demonstrating, as a result of this intercourse, a more refined understanding of his moral sentiments.

In this climate of heightened epistemological and social awareness of language and language use, Hume, Smith and Reid drew upon these movements and infused their presentation of their social and moral theory with elements of both strands of thought. As we have seen, this manifested itself in their work in various discernable ways. At the most simplistic level, in their efforts to build an understanding of man as a social and moral creature, it seemed both important and convenient for Hume, Reid and Smith to use the medium of language and language use as a tool of illustration in the discussion of their theories. The use of language being such a common denominator among all men of every nation, the utilisation of reference to language by way of illustration and illusion by Hume, Smith and Reid served as an easily accessible means of engaging the minds of their audiences. In this instance it would appear that references to language and language use by these scholars served as a tool by which to make sometimes very abstract concepts more accessible and readily comprehensible.

However, the very assumption by these theorists that such analogy and illustration were indeed valid and relevant seems to point to some further, more profound, conclusions by these theorists relating to the nature of language and language use, which extend well beyond simple references to language as an illustrative tool. The very idea that such references were relevant point to the apparent realisation on the part of Hume, Reid and Smith that in their efforts to create a 'science of man' an understanding of language's capabilities and limitations, both epistemological and social, shed valuable light on an

understanding of man's social and moral character. As unique, distinguishing and fundamental as perhaps any characteristic in separating man from beast, man's use of language and its use as a social medium of communication were seen as potentially contributing to their investigations. Therefore, we see language and language use being utilised to substantiate certain claims about the fundamentals of the human character, and arguments that fundamentals of the human character are necessarily reflected in language and language use. As the medium of all understanding and communication within society, language was seen as both the sustainer and mirror of much of man's social interaction and the formation of his understanding of morality. For, if there were fundamental truths as to man's social and moral character, they would most likely be reflected in the medium by which man communicates and interacts with his fellow man. Likewise, limitations and complications in the nature of language itself as the bridge between individuals might in some ways impact or limit the ability of man to adequately communicate his internal sentiments whatever they may be. In this manner, references to language were used to substantiate certain claims, on the assumption that the legitimacy of the claim that 'such and such' a characteristic of man existed would manifest itself and be evident in the language itself; and inherent limitations in the ability of man to always articulate his internal sentiments might impact how those sentiments are perceived and developed within a social context.

Thus, in their efforts to search out empirical evidence as to man's true nature, the utilisation of language by man shed much light onto some fundamental and profound elements of his unique character. The result of this awareness is evident in their respective theories, with the analysis of theoretical methodologies presented by each suggesting a moral universe in which epistemological claims were strengthened by references to language and the importance of a proper understanding of the nature, attributes and limitations of language. Likewise, social and moral understanding and judgment was both demonstrated and cultivated through conscious awareness of the medium of verbal communication.

As a result of this awareness it has become apparent over the course of this thesis that these theorists' assumptions about the nature and limitations of language, and language use, impacted their conception of man's morality and sociability. In turn, the nature of man's moral sentiments was presented by Hume, Smith and Reid as impacting the development of language within the society. What has also become apparent is the extent to which the character of language and language use is assumed as much as utilised within the theories of Hume, Reid and Smith. This is the case because Hume, Smith and Reid seemed to realise that language and morality are two of the fundamental human characteristics differentiate from the rest of creation. As such, in the formation of man's unique nature as he developed into a social and moral creature, the two would develop side by side with both their individual attributes and limitations influencing the other.

Thus, while these theorists differed dramatically in their ultimate conclusions, all three do seem to come to agree on one fundamental point, that the true essence of man's social and moral character is readily demonstrated and substantiated by references to language and language use. These Scots judged man's creation and use of language, and his ability to formulate and act upon a conception of morality, as mirroring each another, sustaining each other and, as a result, inevitably coalescing in man's constitution. Given these suppositions, the investigation of man's sociability and morality were greatly aided by a concurrent exploration of language and language use.

As we have seen, this struggle did not take place simply within the confines of their own individual theories, but can be seen as also playing an important role in their efforts to utilise references to language and language use to substantiate alternative theories of sociability and morality. Nowhere is this fact better illustrated than in the case of Reid. In order to turn the tide of scepticism and what he saw as the moral relativism propagated by the likes of Hume and Smith, we see Reid not only construct a theory that shows an alternative depiction of the nature of

language, but also taking his intellectual opponents to task upon the basis of their mischaracterisation of language and language use. As the last chapter demonstrated, the theoretical and practical are merged in Reid's writings and, as a result, his accusations relating to the twisting of language and language use by Hume and Smith can be justly described not merely as pedantic grammatical quibbling but rather as a theoretical denunciation.

Due to this fact, one cannot dismiss the continual references to language and language use within the works of Hume, Smith and Reid as simply colourful asides, convenient metaphorical tools, or easily accessible illustrations. It is necessary to go beyond this and realise that the very reason these illustrations and references to language and language use were deemed valid was that they served the purpose of substantiating and corroborating much more profound conclusions on the part of these theorists to gain an understanding of the sociable and moral character of mankind. As such, it behooves scholars to acknowledge this point and to examine the writings of the writings of Hume, Smith and Reid with this in mind.

Chapter II

Appendix A

“As the mutual shocks, in *society*, and the oppositions of interest and self-love have constrained mankind to establish the laws of *justice*, in order to preserve the advantages of mutual assistance and protection: in like manner, the eternal contrarieties, in *company*, of men’s pride and self-conceit, have introduced the rules of Good Manners or Politeness, in order to facilitate the intercourse of minds, and an undisturbed commerce and conversation. Among well-bred people, a mutual deference is affected; contempt of others disguised; authority concealed; attention given to each in turn; and an easy stream of conversation maintained, without vehemence, without interruption, without eagerness for victory, and without any airs of superiority. These attentions and regards are immediately *agreeable* to others, abstracted from any consideration of utility or beneficial tendancies: they conciliate affection, promote esteem, and extremely enhance the merit of the person who regulates his behaviour of them.”¹

¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 139.

Appendix B

“All this is the effect of the natural and inherent principles and passions of human nature; and as these passions and principles are inalterable, it may be thought, that our conduct, which depends on them, must be so too, and that ‘twou’d be in vain, either for moralist or politicians, to tamper with us, or attempt to change the usual course of our actions, with a view to public interest. And indeed, did the success of their designs depend upon their success in correcting the selfishness and ingratitude of men, they wou’d never make any progress, unless aided by omnipotence, which is alone able to new-mould the human mind, and change its character in such fundamental articles. All they can pretend to, is, to give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner, than by headlong and impetuous motion”.²

² Hume, Treatise, p. 573.

Chapter III

Appendix A

“A child has no self-command; but, whatever are its emotions, whether fear, or grief, or anger, it endeavours always, by the violence of its outcries, to alarm, as much as it can, the attention of its nurse, or of its parents. While it remains under the custody of such partial protectors, its anger is the first and, perhaps, the only passion that it is taught to moderate. By noise and threatening they are, for their own ease, often obliged to frighten it into good temper; and the passion which incites it to attack, is restrained by that which teaches it to attend to its own safety, When it is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, to soon finds that they have no such indulgent partiality. It naturally wishes to gain their favour, and to avoid their hatred or contempt. Regard even to its own safety teaches it to do so; and it soon finds that it can do so in no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play-fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with. It thus enters into the great school of self-command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection”.¹

¹ Smith., Theory of Moral Sentiments, p. 145.

Appendix B

“Every thing seems hostile, and he would be glad to fly to some inhospitable desert, where he might never more behold the face of a human creature, nor read in the countenance of mankind the condemnation of his crimes. But solitude is still more dreadful than society. His own thoughts can present him with nothing but what is black, unfortunate, and disastrous. ... The horror of solitude drives him back into society, and he comes again into the presence of mankind, astonished to appear before them, loaded with shame and distracted with fear, in order to supplicate some little protection from the countenance of those very judges, who he knows have already all unanimously condemned him. Such is the nature of that sentiment, which is properly called remorse; of all the sentiments which can enter the human breast the most dreadful”.²

² Ibid., pp. 84 - 85.

Chapter IV

Appendix A

“In his Professorship of Logic, to which Mr. Smith was appointed on his first introduction into the University, he soon saw the necessity of departing widely from the plan that had been followed by his predecessors, and of directing the attention of his pupils to studies of a more interesting and useful nature than the logic and metaphysics of the school. Accordingly, after exhibiting a general view of the powers of the mind, and explaining so much of the ancient logic as was requisite to gratify curiosity with respect to an artificial method of reasoning, which had once occupied the universal attention of the learned, he dedicated all the rest of his time to the delivery of a system of rhetoric and belles lettres. The best method of explaining and illustrating the various powers of the human mind, the most useful part of metaphysics, arises from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the principles of those literary which contribute to persuasion and entertainment. By these arts, everything we perceive or feel, every operation of our minds, is expressed and delineated in such a manner, that it may be clearly distinguished and remembered. There is, at the same time, no branch of literature more suited to youth at their first entrance upon philosophy than this, which lays hold of their taste and their feelings”.¹

¹ Dugald Stewart. Account of the Life and Writing of Adam Smith, L.L.D., originally published, (London: T. Cadall and W. Davies, 1795); cited in: Intro., Theory of Moral Sentiments, p. 2. The editor also notes in footnote #4 that “Stewart identifies his informant as Millar in a note added to the reprint of the ‘Account’ included in *Works of Adam Smith* (London, 1811), v.412”.

Appendix B

What follows is Smith's characterisation of a 'Prudent Man', from The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Part VI, 'Of the Character of Virtue':

"He rarely frequents, and more rarely figures in those convivial societies which are distinguished for the jollity and gaiety of their conversation [new Paragraph] But though his conversation may not always be very sprightly or diverting, it is always perfectly inoffensive.... Both in his conduct and conversation, he is an exact observer of decency, and respects with an almost religious scrupulosity, all the established decorums and ceremonials of society. And, in this respect, he sets a much better example than has frequently been done by men of such more splendid talents and virtues; who, in all ages, from that of Socrates and Aristippus, down to that of Dr. Swift and Voltaire, and from that of Phillip and Alexander the Great, down to that of the great Czar Peter of Moscovy, have too often distinguished themselves by the most improper and even insolent contempt of all the ordinary decorums of life and conversation, and who thereby set the most pernicious example to those who wish to resemble them, and who too often content themselves with imitating their follies, without even attempting to attain their perfection".²

² Smith, *Ibid.*, pp. 214 - 215.

Appendix C

“The different situations of different ages and countries are apt, in the same manner, to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praise-worthy, vary, according to that degree of politeness, which could be highly esteemed, perhaps would be thought effeminate adulteration, in Russia, would be regarded as rudeness and barbarism at the court of France. ... Every age and country look upon that degree of each quality, which is commonly to be met with in those who are esteemed among themselves, as the golden mean of that particular talent or virtue. And as this varies, according as their different circumstances render different qualities more or less habitual to them, their sentiments concerning the exact propriety of character and behaviour vary accordingly”.³

³ Smith, Moral Sentiments, p. 204.

Chapter V

Appendix A

“To society we owe the ability of communicating our thoughts and sentiments to each other by language. Though many brutes animals are gregarious, and have a kind of society with their kind, by which they are very helpful to one another, yet none of them was ever found to have language, by which one can communicate its knowledge and experience to another. They have indeed some natural signs of their wants and of their desires and fears, which Nature teaches them to use and to understand when used by their companions. ... This and such like natural signs are all that appears in the most sagacious Brutes that looks like language, never was any tribe found to have the art of communicating their sentiments to one another by artificial signs which can call language. On the other hand, I know no well vouched account of any tribe of man, however savage, who had lived in society for some time, who had not language, by which they could communicate to one another what they know and had observed. The language of savages always keeps pace with their knowledge, and it can go no farther. They have names for the objects they are acquired with and can express their various changes of those objects and events that have fallen [within] their notice. So that language has very justly been accounting one of the characteristick distinctions of the human species.”¹

¹ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/30, ‘Lecture Three: Culture of Nature’.

Appendix B

“Perhaps some may think that the want of language will be no impediment to the exercise of his rational powers. Nay perhaps, some will apprehend that he will think more accurately and reason more justly by being free from the encumbrances of language, where imperfections and ambiguities are one great case of error among mankind. However plausible this observation may seem, I believe it has no just foundation, and that men would never learn to reason without language. I grant that without language a man might retain his imagination distinct notion of objects which nature present to his senses, so as to know it is the same object when it makes its appearance again. This the more sagacious brutes can do. But to those notions which are formed by the mind itself, by abstraction and composition; in a word all general notions, I apprehend that without language we would never form them or be able to use them in reasoning. A general or abstract notion is the manufacture of the mind itself, so to speak, it has no archtypical nature, it comprehends only certain attributes or relations of beings, is distinguished from other things belonging to the same beings by giving a name to it. The name we give it, and the known meaning or definition of the name serves as a boundary or enclosure to distinguish it, from other attributes or relations that are not comprehended under that name. Take away the name and the enclosure is removed. Like a field which has no limits to distinguish it from the contiguous ground.”²

² Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS. 4/1/30, ‘Lecture Three: Culture of Nature’.

Appendix C

“Now it is to be observed that there can be no reasoning, no rational train of thinking without such general and abstract notions. For reasoning must consist of propositions and every proposition must include some general notion. We learn to form such general notions by learning language and if we had no language we should never have learned to form them. I believe that every man will in his experience, that when he attempts to any regular train of thinking, though he does it in silence and without uttering a sound, he will find it impossible to go on without conceiving more or less the words by which his thought may be expressed and the more distinctly he cloths his thoughts with words, the more accurately he will think; thought being a thing too subtle and too spiritual to be retained in the memory and imagination without being clothed with some sensible image. This appears to me to be the condition of human nature in our present state. And I see no reason to think that a man without society and consequently without any kind of language, would ever acquire so much of the exercises of his rational powers as to be entitled to the denomination of rational creature.”³

³ Reid, *Birkwood Collections*, MS 4/I/30, ‘Lecture Three: Culture of Nature’.

Appendix D

“Can any stronger proof be desired, that this quality is that to which the vulgar give the name of *colour*? If it should be said; that this quality, to which we give the name of *colour*, is unknown to the vulgar, and, therefore, can have no name among them, I answer, it is, indeed, known only by its effects - that is, by its exciting a certain idea in us; but are there not numberless qualities of bodies which are known only by their effects, to which, notwithstanding, we find it necessary to give names? Why, then, should not the vulgar give a name to a quality, whose effects are every moment perceived by their eyes? We all have the reason, therefore, that the nature of the thing admits, to think that the vulgar apply the name of *colour* to that quality of bodies which excites in us what the philosophers call the *idea of colour*. ... Philosophers have thought fit to leave that quality of bodies which the vulgar call *colour*, without a name, and to give the name of *colour* to the idea or appearance, to which, as we have shewn, the vulgar give no name, because they never make it an object of thought or reflection. Hence it appears, that, when philosophers affirm that colour is not in bodies, but in the mind, and the vulgar affirm that colour is not in the mind, but is a quality of bodies, there is no difference between them about things, but only about the meaning of a word”.⁴

⁴ Reid, *Enquiry*, pp. 68 - 69.

Appendix E

“I observe that the word Sympathy seems not to have always the same fixed and determinate meaning in this System, nor to be so accurately defined as is necessary to make it the foundation of a distinct Theory of Morals[.] In the beginning of this work the Author observes that in every passion pleasant as well as painful, the emotions of the bystander correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the Sufferer. And that this disposition of the human mind is what we call Sympathy. I do not find any other definition of Sympathy throughout the Book. And this I think is not what is commonly meant by the word Sympathy[.] The etymology of the word plainly points out the common means of it in the English Language[.] It supposes some painful or agreeable feeling or passion in the person sympathised with, & implies causes a correspondent & similar feeling in the spectator [;] this is what we call Sympathy. But Dr. Smith makes his Sympathy to correspond not to what the person sympathised with reality & actually suffers or enjoys but what he should suffer or enjoy. ... I conceive this meaning of the word Sympathy is altogether new & that if one had not a hypotheses to serve by it he would never have dreamed that it is Sympathy that makes us blush for the imprudence and rudeness of another. It might I think more properly be called Antipathy but that we may not dispute about words, let us suppose that our feeling that Emotion for another which he ought to feel but does not feel, is to be called Sympathy. It is evident that this Sympathy supposes a moral Judgement and consequently a moral faculty”.⁵

⁵ Reid, *Birkwood Collection*, MS.2131/3/1/28.

The analysis in Lecture 99 of the Glasgow Lectures also leads off with the accusation that throughout the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “[T]hat sympathy has not always the precisely same meaning thro’ out his work nor is his definition of it so accurate as to be a foundation for a Theory of Morals”:⁶

“In the beginning of the work the author observes that in every passion pleasant as well as painful the emotion of the bystander corresponds to what the person affected feels, he enters by imagination into the sentiments of the sufferer, & it is this disposition of the Mind which we call Sympathy. I do not find another definition of this thro’ his work & this is not what is commonly meant by that word. The etymology of the word points out its common meaning in the English Language. It supposes an agreeable or painful feeling in the person we sympathise with & occasions a similar feeling in the Spectator, this is what is commonly called Sympathy, but Dr. Smith makes it consist not in feeling what they actually do feel or enjoy but what they ought to feel or enjoy. ... Now this is surely is giving a new meaning to the word *sympathy* & no one who had not a hypothesis to serve by it, would ever call the blushing for the imprudence of another, sympathy”.⁷

⁶ Baird, Lecture 99. It does seem odd that Reid, seems here to want precise definitions, yet he contends that such premises do not lend themselves to precise definitions.

⁷ Ibid.

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